MO XIANG TONG XIU

Heaven Official's Blessing

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TIAN GUAN CI FU

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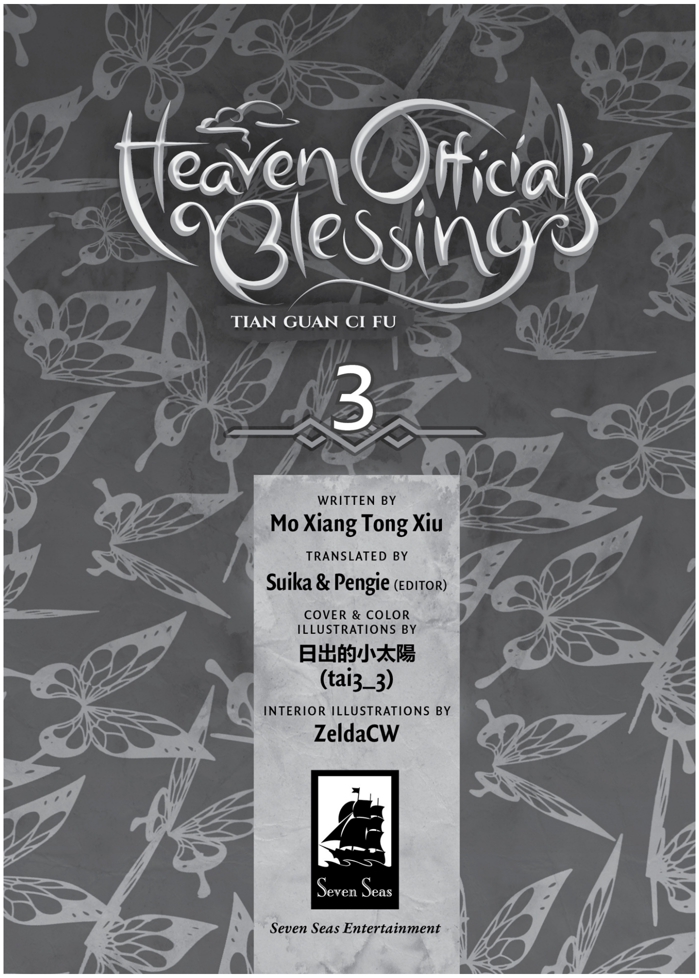

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TIAN GUAN CI FU

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Chapter 28:
Fishing for Offerings, the Boor Meets the Crown Prince

"UNVEIL—!"

With that booming announcement, an enormous, bright red brocade dropped to the ground. Roaring cheers erupted from the crowd of thousands, shooting straight to the heavens.

This was a divine statue of the crown prince, crafted in gold. It held a sword in one hand and a flower in the other, symbolizing the virtues of the prince himself: "The power to end the world, but with a heart as gentle as a flower." The face of that statue was soft and beautiful, with long, elegant brows and thin, clean lips that curved slightly with a ghost of a smile. One could describe it as affectionate but not frivolous, neutral but not indifferent—it was a compassionate and handsome face.

This was the eight-thousandth Temple of the Crown Prince within the Kingdom of Xianle.

Three years after ascension, there were already eight thousand temples raised in his name. Such a passionate following was unheard of in all of history and likely would never be rivaled in the future. Truly, he was the one and only.

However, this eight-thousandth temple couldn't boast the most glamorous divine statue of the crown prince. The first Palace of Xianle was built on the summit of Mount Taicang where the crown prince lived and trained in his youth, which had been renamed to

Crown Prince Summit. It was also there that the first divine statue of the crown prince was sculpted, which the king himself personally unveiled. That divine statue of the crown prince was over fifteen meters high, its craftsmanship legendary. Rather than simply settling for gilding its surface, it was built entirely of pure, solid gold—truly worthy to be called "golden."

The crowds of devotees were endless within the Palace of Xianle, and so dense that they even spilled over the building's threshold. The incense vessel stationed before the palace was stuffed to bursting with incense sticks both long and short. Out of necessity alone, the palace's donation box was built much bigger and stockier than average—if it hadn't been built so large, it would have been filled with offerings before the day was over and those who came later wouldn't be able to donate. In the courtyard of the temple, there was a clear pond which was swimming with thrown coins that shimmered brightly in the water. Because of all the coins being thrown by devotees, many of the old turtles residing in the pond didn't dare to peep their heads out anymore with those projectiles constantly bouncing off their shells. No matter how the temple's resident cultivators asked people not to do it, their efforts were fruitless. Plum trees bloomed in abundance within the massive red walls of the temple, their branches tied with countless bright-red prayer ribbons. They painted a vibrant scene; waves of flowing crimson amongst a sea of blossoms.

And in the interior of the temple, Xie Lian sat with upright poise just below his own divine statue. He watched over the milling crowd. No one could see him, but he could see and hear their chatter.

"How come the Temple of the Crown Prince doesn't have any cushions for us to prostrate?"

"Yeah, even the Temple Master said we can't prostrate. The temple's already unveiled, so what's goin' on?"

"This must be your first time at a Palace of Xianle. All Palaces of Xianle are like this. I heard that after His Highness ascended, he sent dreams to many temple donors—and to this very temple's master—telling them not to have devotees prostrate. So none of the Crown Prince Temples have places to do so."

Although no one could see him, Xie Lian nodded. However, a few of the visitors laughed.

"Where's the logic in that? Aren't we meant to prostrate before gods? That must just be a rumor."

Xie Lian made a confused noise.

"That's right! We must kneel!" another visitor agreed. "Only by kneeling can we show our sincerity, right?"

Thus, one took the lead and knelt down. Soon after, many others followed suit and knelt on the ground. The hundreds and thousands of people squished inside and outside of the great hall all started kowtowing before the divine statue, their forms rising and falling, muttering as they silently prayed for blessings.

Xie Lian wordlessly slunk away. *Never mind, we'll take it slowly,* he thought.

The next moment, a great cacophony of voices came crashing down on him from all around like a massive wave.

"Achieve a high score! A high score! This year I must achieve a high score! If I get it, I will fulfill the vow I swore to you!"[1]

"I pray for safe travels!"

"The girl I like fancies my shixiong! Please make him uglier, please, I beg you."

"Fuck! I refuse to believe that I can't give birth to a big, chubby brat!"

There were all kinds of prayers. Xie Lian was getting a massive headache just listening and hurriedly cast a spell with a hand seal, blocking out the voices entirely.

Silence had only just fallen when there was a sudden shout, and a man clad in black came dashing out from the back of the palace, his hands covering his ears.

"What the hell are these prayers?!" he roared.

The worshippers didn't notice the man and continued their kowtowing. Xie Lian sighed and patted his shoulder.

"Thanks for your hard work, Feng Xin," he said with a smile.

Such an exuberant Palace of Xianle! Every day, Xie Lian heard prayers that numbered in the thousands. At first, he charged forth with a vigor born from the novelty of this new position—he didn't care whether the matters were big or small, he worked through each one personally. But after a while, there really were way too many prayers coming in, so he divided the work and tossed some into the laps of Feng Xin and Mu Qing. After reviewing the prayers to determine which were within their purview and which could be ignored, they would pass the important matters back to him.

Once Mu Qing finished his review, he would report back without ever voicing a complaint. Feng Xin, on the other hand, just couldn't understand why there were so many who'd blindly submit prayers for petty business—they would even bring entreaties for harmonious bedchamber matters to the Palace of Xianle. Xie Lian was a martial god, not a marital one, and certainly couldn't manage such things. And with prayers like these coming nonstop, the other heavenly officials eventually began taking offense. They secretly accused Xie Lian and his coterie of hogging the outhouse without taking a dump—that is, for taking on matters they had no jurisdiction over and roping in devotees they had no business taking. To those accusations, Xie Lian had no rebuttal.

Feng Xin still covered his ears with his hands, even though the gesture wasn't helping one bit. "Your Highness, why do you have so many female devotees?!"

Still seated, Xie Lian crossed his arms in his sleeves as clouds of incense lingered around him. He replied with a smile, "What's wrong with that? Beauties abundant like clouds are pleasing to the eyes."

Feng Xin's face dropped. "It's not 'pleasing' at all. It's like these female devotees' only prayers are wishing to look nicer, marry nicer, give birth to a nice son. Nothing of importance; even the sight of them gives me a headache!"

Xie Lian grinned and was about to respond, when suddenly there was a commotion among the crowd. The two looked out and heard someone speak in a hushed voice.

"Prince Xiao Jing has come, let's get outta here! Prince Xiao Jing is here!"

When the people heard the name "Prince Xiao Jing," it was as if they heard "The Devil Himself." Everyone's faces drained of color, and the crowd dispersed like birds. In but an instant, like a tornado had blown past, most of the worshippers who were paying respects in the hall had fled.

Soon after, a young man crossed the threshold. He had a decadent sort of appearance, lavishly dressed in brocade and a cape, and he swaggered forward with a glazed offering lamp in his hands. His face resembled Xie Lian's, as long as you didn't look at his eyes—but upon seeing that arrogant, conceited gaze, one could easily discern between the two. It was none other than Qi Rong.

Qi Rong had reached the age of seventeen or eighteen by now and had matured in both his appearance and bearing. He had finally managed to put on an air of nobility, at least somewhat. He stepped through the doors but forbade the entry of any member of his retinue. Holding the lamp with both hands, he crossed into the great hall and swept aside his cape before kneeling on the clean floors. He raised the lamp to his forehead and prostrated solemnly. The two on top of the altar shared a look. Feng Xin smacked his lips, and Xie Lian understood the annoyance in his eyes.

Three years ago, when Xie Lian first left the imperial capital to travel the world, Qi Rong was still in detention. Upon his return, he hadn't yet had a chance to see his little cousin before he suddenly and rumblingly ascended in his sleep that very night. Over the last three years, Xie Lian sent a number of dreams to his parents, the state preceptor, and others. He also sent one to Qi Rong, admonishing him to be kind to others from then on, to keep his behavior in check and avoid causing trouble. Thus, Qi Rong had been actively commissioning the construction of temples everywhere and offering donations and lamps for good merits.

Although he worked hard, sincere to the bone, he would still stir up trouble every now and then—and Feng Xin was the one who'd have to clean up after him. Because of this, Xie Lian could understand Feng Xin's irritation.

On the floor, Qi Rong finished paying his respects and started talking (or rather, *whining*) aloud. "Cousin Crown Prince, this is the five-hundredth light I've offered. I'm such a loyal little brother, so when will you come see me? Even a dream would be fine. Yifu and Yimu both miss you dearly, but you ignore us. Truly high and mighty—and cold."

He did not notice that Feng Xin was standing right there, reminding Xie Lian of the rules about such things. "Ignore him. The Heavenly Emperor told you that unless it's a matter of great import, heavenly officials are not allowed to show themselves before mortals without permission. Families especially must be avoided."

"Don't worry, I know," Xie Lian said.

Qi Rong rose to his feet holding the lamp, reached for a brush, and started writing on the lamp with his head lowered. Since both Xie Lian and Feng Xin could both distinctively recall all their past traumas with Qi Rong, they couldn't help approaching him to check what he was writing. When they saw that it was something normal like "I pray for the country's prosperity and good weather," and not a prayer for some family to be beheaded before the whole marketplace or something similar, the two breathed a sigh of relief.

Watching Qi Rong write stroke after stroke so carefully and properly, Xie Lian was reminded of something.

When Qi Rong first returned to the palace with his mother, there was an incident. A group of royals and nobles were traveling to Mount Taicang to pray for blessings. Qi Rong's mother had only just escaped back to the palace in shame after eloping with a vulgar peasant, and since then she hadn't dared to show her face. Nonetheless, she still wanted blessings for her son and to have him experience the outside world, rather than being shut inside with her and turning into an ignorant nobody. And so she begged the queen to take Qi Rong along.

Although attempts were made to keep things under wraps, royal scandals always shot out faster than an arrow. There wasn't anyone in the imperial capital who didn't know what had happened to that mother and her son. Thus, many of the noble children on the trip deliberately left Qi Rong out, not playing with him or talking to him. Xie Lian saw a swing set and ran over to play, and all the children of the same age ran after him; they took turns pushing the crown prince on the swings and considered it an honorable task. When Xie Lian swung to the highest point, he inadvertently looked down and saw Qi Rong hiding in the queen's shadow, head peeking out and eyes watching him with envy.

Once they reached the Palace of Divine Might and offered their lights, the grown-ups went to beg the state preceptor for fortunes or for the deciphering thereof, or conversed amongst themselves. This left the children alone in the hall to offer up small lamps in play.

It was Qi Rong's first time meeting the queen, and he didn't know she had already offered a light in his and his mother's name. He saw how beautiful the lamps were and wanted to offer one up for blessings too. He was young and didn’t understand much, so he asked those around him how to write words of prayer for his mother. But the children from Qi Rong’s branch of the family detested him, having been influenced by their elders into the belief that both mother and son had shamed the family. And so, they decided to trick him.

Xie Lian had been focused on writing on his own lamp, but when he finally put down his brush, he heard giggling from behind him that didn’t sound kind. He turned his head and was greeted by the sight of Qi Rong with his hands covered in ink. The boy was holding a lamp like a precious treasure, his face bright with a smile. He was about to offer the light, but on that lamp, these were the words written in ugly scribbles: *“I pray that my mother and I return soon to the heavens—Qi Rong.”*

Xie Lian flew into a rage and broke that lamp on the spot.

He himself wasn’t very old at the time, but all the noble children present fell to their knees in terror, too afraid to speak. Once he’d regained his composure, Xie Lian personally rewrote a prayer on a new lamp for Qi Rong, and no one dared play any tricks after that. Later, when they descended the mountain, Xie Lian went on the swings again. This time, Qi Rong emerged from behind the queen and pushed him of his own initiative. He was shorter than Xie Lian, but he pushed especially enthusiastically. He still gazed at him from below, except now his gaze had transformed from envy into one of worship. After that, he became Xie Lian’s tail, wagging along behind his Cousin Crown Prince.

It must be said that Qi Rong had once been fairly normal. But somehow and somewhere along the way, he went progressively further astray. That being said, in the past three years, Xie Lian had to deal with too many people and too many matters, so he had no time for relations of old and wouldn’t know whether Qi Rong had improved.

While Xie Lian was reminiscing, Qi Rong had already offered his light and was getting ready to leave the hall. Unexpectedly, as he backed away,[2] he bumped into someone. Qi Rong staggered, then whipped around, cussing before he’d even seen who it was.

“WHAT THE HELL?! Are you blind, or did you die standing there and forgot to move aside?!”

The moment he opened his mouth, Xie Lian and Feng Xin both put their hands over their foreheads and thought, *He hasn't changed at all. Still the same Qi Rong!*

It might've been because he had lived with his father until he was five and couldn't help but be influenced by the rowdy market environment and his father's violent temper. But even long after, when the queen patiently tried to educate Qi Rong, the moment he got agitated he'd "reveal his true form," as the state preceptor had once put it.

The one who Qi Rong bumped into was a ragged young man of twenty-four or twenty-five. He carried a simple satchel, and his straw shoes were so worn they were almost rimless and soleless. This young man's face was wan and sallow, his lips dry and cracked, his posture slumped—however, his expression was bright, his physique was thin but not weak, and his eyes were shining.

"What is this place?" he asked.

"This is the Palace of Xianle, the Temple of the Crown Prince!" Qi Rong replied.

The man started mumbling, "Temple of the Crown Prince? Crown Prince? So this is the imperial palace?" He saw the divine statue inside, its shimmering golden light reflecting on his face. "Is that gold?" he asked.

Seeing how glamorous the temple was, he had mistaken it for the imperial palace.

A guard was approaching to drive him away, and he answered, "Of course it's gold. But the Temple of the Crown Prince is a *temple*; it's not the same as the imperial palace! You don't even know where you are—where did a barbarian like you come from?!"

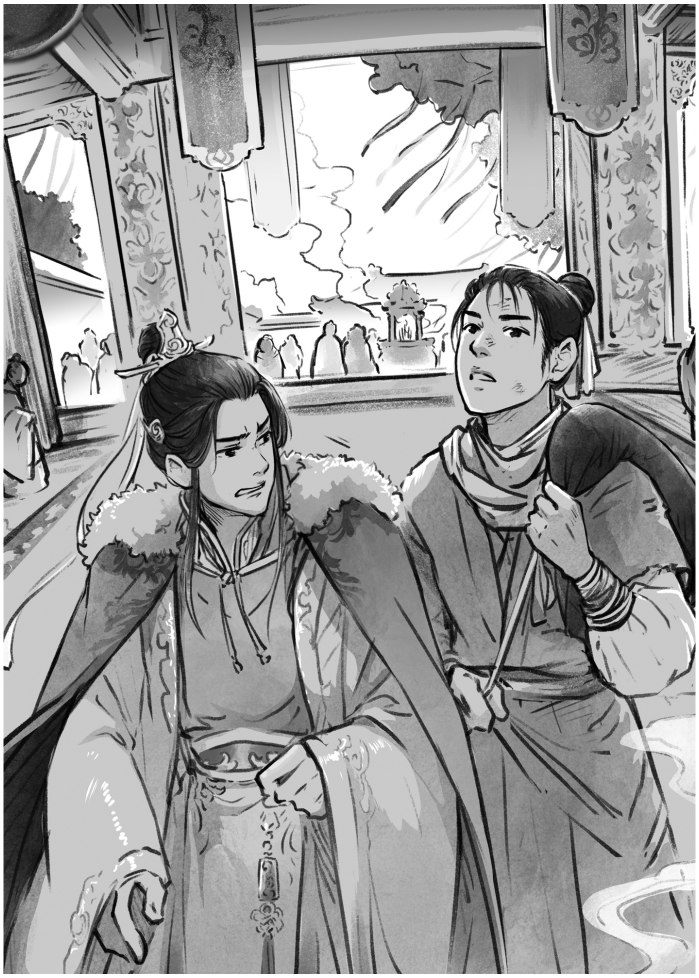
"Then where's the imperial palace?" that man asked.

Qi Rong narrowed his eyes. "Why do you ask?"

The man replied, quite bluntly, "I need to go to the palace and see the king. I have something to tell him."

Qi Rong and the guards burst out laughing, disdain clear on their faces. "Where did this country bumpkin come from? You want to do *what* at the palace? See the king? As if you can see him just because you want to? They probably won’t even let you through the gates when you get there.”

The man didn’t seem affected by the taunt. “I’ll try. Maybe it’ll work.”



“Then go ahead!” Qi Rong laughed heartily, before purposely pointing in the wrong direction.

“Thanks,” the man said. He adjusted his satchel, then turned to walk out of the hall.

When he reached the stone bridge, he suddenly stopped in his tracks. Through the clear pond water, piles and piles of coins could be seen at the bottom. The young man seemed to think for a moment, and in the next second, he leapt over the bridge railing and jumped into the pond.

He was extremely agile, and once he was in the water, he bent down and started fishing up handful upon handful of coins, stuffing them into the satchel in his arms. Since they had never seen anyone who dared steal a god’s offerings before, Xie Lian and Feng Xin both stood in stunned shock. Qi Rong was also taken aback, but he immediately erupted in anger. He rushed to the bridge and slapped at the railing, yelling.

“WHAT THE FUCK?! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?! SOME-ONE PULL HIM OUT! WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK?!”

Several guards immediately jumped into the water to pull the man out. But he was unexpectedly quite skilled in martial arts, throwing punches and kicks, and shockingly no one could do anything to him. Qi Rong was jumping up and down in rage, and none of the cultivators in the temple yard knew what to do. That young man fished up enough coins to fill his satchel, then slung it over his shoulder. He moved to climb out but accidentally slipped on some moss, falling back into the water with a large splash. It was only then that the guards managed to seize him and wrangle him back ashore.

Qi Rong didn’t pause a moment in his fit. He kicked the man, yelling, “You dare steal this money?!”

Feng Xin was already standing close by when Qi Rong raised his leg, and seizing the right moment, he blocked the kick. While Qi Rong’s kick looked vicious, it actually landed lightly. Although Qi Rong couldn’t see who was playing tricks on him, he still felt like something was off—as if there was a ghost clinging to his leg. The feeling persisted as he violently kicked several more times, and he was left perturbed at the lack of impact.

The young man seemed to have swallowed water, and he coughed a few times. “That money was just lying there in the pond, so why can’t I use it to save people?”

Unsatisfied with his kicks, Qi Rong finally stopped from sheer irritation. “Save who? Who are you? Where’d you come from?”

He only asked so he could declare the young man guilty of a crime and throw him in prison, but the young man was an honest soul, and he answered the questions with equal honesty.

“My name is Lang Ying. I’m from Yong’an,” he answered. “We’re going through a drought. There’s no water, the crops won’t grow, and everyone’s starving because there’s no income. There’s water here, and food, and money. You use gold to build statues and throw coins in the water. So why can’t you share some with us?”

Yong’an was a large city within the Kingdom of Xianle. Xie Lian rose to his feet, his expression grave.

“Feng Xin, there’s a drought going on in Yong’an? How come I didn’t hear of this?”

Feng Xin turned to look at him. “I don’t know—I didn’t hear about it either. Let’s ask Mu Qing later, all right?”

Chapter 29:
Toppled Golden Statue, the Boor Buries the Suffering Son

"CALL HIM OVER RIGHT THIS INSTANT," Xie Lian said.

Feng Xin pressed the index and middle fingers of his right hand against his temple, connecting with Mu Qing in the spiritual communication array. Out in the temple yard, Qi Rong clicked his tongue.

"Yong'an? So you crawled out of that middle-of-nowhere dump? Barren lands really do produce unruly fruit. Think you can rob the gods just because you're poor?"

"Then I won't steal," Lang Ying said. "I will pay my respects and worship this god of yours right now. I will kneel and kowtow and beg him to give me money to save the lives of the people of my hometown. But will he give it to me?"

Qi Rong was momentarily stumped. He grumbled inwardly, *If I say yes, is this guy gonna run away with all that money with full conviction?* Thus, he replied, "His Highness the Crown Prince is a god now, and gods are busy as hell! Who has the time to mind unruly people like you?"

Lang Ying nodded slowly at this. "I didn't think he'd care either. It's not like we never prayed or begged, but it didn't work at all. Those who are meant to die still die."

Xie Lian was shaken.

"You! So disrespectful in the halls of a god—aren't you afraid of his condemnation?!" a cultivator shouted.

"It doesn't matter anymore," Lang Ying replied. "He can condemn me if he likes. I'm no longer afraid of his neglect, so why should I be afraid of his condemnation?"

Qi Rong gave a wave. A number of guards waiting on the side rushed forward, surrounded that young man, and started beating him down. Feng Xin was still hard at work, softening their attacks where he could so it only appeared that Lang Ying was being pulverized. But the man himself just looked confused—he didn’t dodge nor evade, and only occasionally raised his hands to protect the satchel on his back.

Meanwhile, Qi Rong had grabbed a handful of melon seeds and munched as he jiggled his leg.

“Beat him! Beat him hard in the name of this prince!”

Truly, the very image of a villain.

At hearing him call his own title, Lang Ying’s head shot up.

“You’re a prince? Prince of what? Do you live in the palace? Can you meet with the king?”

“I’m your granddaddy!” Qi Rong spat. “You still think you can see the king, don’t you? His Majesty’s got a million things on his plate—he ain’t got time for you!”

Lang Ying craned his neck up. “Why hasn’t he got time for me? The gods don’t have time, and neither does His Majesty, so who has time to hear me? Just who should I go to?” he demanded stubbornly. “Does the king know how many people have died in Yong’an? Do the people of the imperial capital know? If they know, why would they rather throw money in the water than give it to us?”

“It’s our money, and we’ll spend it as we will,” Qi Rong scoffed. “Even if we skip it over the water like stones it’s nobody’s damn business. Why do we have to give it to you? What, you’re entitled to it just because you’re poor?”

There was some logic in what he said, but it was incredibly inappropriate for the time and place. Xie Lian was about to find a way to seal Qi Rong’s mouth shut when a black-clad youth rushed over from behind the palace.

“Your Highness sent for me?”

Xie Lian waved him over. “Mu Qing, come quickly. In all the prayers you’ve reviewed recently, have you heard anything about a drought in Yong’an?”

Mu Qing was taken aback. “No, I haven’t.”

As he continued to manage his own task, Feng Xin snapped, “How couldn’t you? Refugees have already fled here!”

It was said in a tone so sharp that Mu Qing’s face stiffened. He replied in a hard voice, “I told the truth; there really wasn’t anything. Are you trying to say that I’m purposely withholding information? Well, did you hear anything yourself? I’m on duty at the Temple of the Crown Prince during odd months, and you’re on duty for even months. If there really were people from Yong’an praying for the end of a drought, there’s no reason the drought-related prayers would only come in during odd months, while you heard nothing.”

Feng Xin paused and realized that was certainly true. “I didn’t say you did it on purpose. You always overthink these things.”

It seemed they were ready to start quarreling again. Xie Lian gestured for them to pause, feeling his head throb.

“All right, Feng Xin didn’t mean anything by it. Both of you, stop this instant.”

The two immediately stopped arguing. Incidentally, it was just then that Qi Rong finally grew tired of watching his subordinates beat up on Lang Ying. He grabbed for a small pouch to dump all the melon seed shells into as he gave an order to the guards.

“Drag that thieving crook to prison and lock him up.”

The guards acknowledged the command with a “Yessir!” and several of them picked up Lang Ying.

“Let’s deal with the problem at hand,” Xie Lian said. “We’ll save this man first, and I’ll ask him about Yong’an properly later.”

Mu Qing’s expression relaxed, and he asked cautiously, “Your Highness, how do you plan on doing that? You can’t show yourself so easily.”

Since his ascension, that was one of the rules Xie Lian just couldn’t understand. The heavenly officials all talked about helping the common people, and yet they also put on airs, positioned themselves above mortals, and barred themselves from appearing before them at will. Xie Lian was restricted at every turn, which caused him endless frustration. Thankfully, he also had ways to get around this problem.

Without a thought and without looking back, he reached out and pushed. The people standing before them noticed the shadow on the ground vaguely shaking and turned around in confusion.

The next moment, Qi Rong yelled in horror, “COUSIN CROWN PRINCE—”

Xie Lian had pushed his own divine statue over!

That kind, beautiful, sword- and flower-holding golden statue swayed back and forth, then slowly listed to the side. Qi Rong looked as though he’d just seen his own mother kick out the stool while hanging herself, aghast to the extreme. He lost all care for Lang Ying as he rushed desperately to cling onto the leg of that statue, stubbornly trying to keep it upright and screaming heartrendingly as he did.

“What are you useless pieces of trash waiting for?! Help me hold him up! Don’t let Cousin Crown Prince fall! HE CAN’T FALL!”

While he was terrified to distraction, Xie Lian calmly and casually passed by him and stepped out of the hall. Feng Xin and Mu Qing’s expressions were positively dumbfounded.

It took a moment before Feng Xin finally cried, “Your Highness! That was your own divine statue!”

A toppled statue was a bad omen, so doing the toppling was more or less taboo. A heavenly official who’d push over his own statue like that was unheard of—a rarity in all the Three Realms.

“It’s only a big hunk of gold,” Xie Lian said. “If I didn’t do that, I wouldn’t have caught their attention. You two go and hold the golden statue down, keep them in place. I’m going to go meet with that man.”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing were still speechless and could do nothing but obey. They stood next to that divine statue and each used just one finger to press down on it—that small bit of power was all they needed. The ones holding it up on the other side had to use every ounce of their strength, and they could still only keep the half-toppled status quo, their teeth clenched hard.

“As expected of true, solid gold…such weight!”

As for Lang Ying, he’d long since fallen on his bottom, and he now noticed that the guards were no longer concerned with him. He stared at the golden shine of the divine statue for a long while before he rose to his feet, dusted himself off, and hurried away carrying his satchel. Xie Lian followed behind, watching. Lang Ying ran for a fair distance and entered a lush and heavy forest, then looked around before sitting down under a tree to rest. Xie Lian hid behind that tree, then cast a spell with a casual hand seal to transform himself into the form of a young, white-clad cultivator.

After the transformation, he looked himself up and down to ensure there was nothing amiss. He was fiddling with his whisk, thinking about how to approach without appearing too abruptly, when he noticed that Lang Ying was squatting next to a puddle by the tree and busying himself with digging a hole in the ground.

“…”

The young man’s hands were large, and one swipe was enough to create a wide, deep gouge. Dirt flew as he dug, and he looked much like a very lean, black wolfdog. Xie Lian was just wondering why the man had suddenly started digging when he saw Lang Ying wipe the mud off on his pants, scoop a handful of water with both hands, and bring it to his lips.

At the sight of this, Xie Lian couldn’t hide anymore and rushed out. He stopped the man’s hands and passed him a water bottle he retrieved from his qiankun sleeves.

Lang Ying’s cheeks were already round with a mouthful of puddle water, and he swallowed it down. He gazed at this little cultivator who had appeared so suddenly, but he didn’t question it, nor did he reject the offer. He took the water bottle and gulped down its entire contents in one go.

Only after he finished did he utter, “Thanks.”

Since he had already appeared so abruptly, Xie Lian stopped caring about having a natural opening line. He tried his best to swing his whisk transcendentally, like someone worthy of trust. “My friend, where did you come from and where are you going?”

“We came from the Bay of Lang-Er in the city of Yong’an. I was going to head to the imperial palace, but I’ve changed my mind. I’m not going anymore.”

Xie Lian was taken aback. “We?”

Lang Ying nodded. “We. Me…and my son.”

Xie Lian was growing even more confused, but his heart was sinking. He watched as Lang Ying removed the satchel from his back and opened it.

“My son.”

Inside that satchel he’d been carrying on his back was the dead body of a small child.

The child was a tiny creature who looked no more than two or three years of age. His face was yellow, his cheeks sallow, and his head had a few sparse strands of thin, yellowing hair stuck to it. Rashes streaked across his skin. That little face was twisted into a strange expression, as if holding back tears and terribly miserable. His eyes were already closed but his mouth was still open, though no sound would ever come from it again.

Xie Lian’s pupils shrank, his spirit shocked to the core, unable to speak. No wonder he had felt that this young man had a strange air about him. He couldn’t have explained what that strangeness was, only that he was abnormal. The way he spoke, the way he behaved, it was like he didn’t consider consequences at all—he was blunt and berserk and entirely reckless. But at this point, why would he need to consider consequences?

After showing him his son, Lang Ying wrapped the child anew, carefully tucking the cloth around him. Seeing how focused he was in his action made Xie Lian miserable. It was his very first time seeing the corpse of such a young child.

He asked, stammering, “How…how did your son die?”

Lang Ying adjusted the satchel on his back and replied, bemused, “How did he die…I don’t know that either. Thirst, hunger, sickness. Maybe a bit of everything.”

He scratched his head.

“When I first carried him out of Yong’an, he would still cough a bit, and he called for me from my back—‘Dad! Dad!’ Eventually there was no more of that, only coughing. And then there were no more coughs. I thought he’d fallen asleep. Later, when I found something to eat and tried to wake him up, he wouldn’t.”

The child had died on the road of escape.

Lang Ying shook his head. “I don’t know how to take care of children. If my wife knew our son died, she’d scold me to death.” After a moment of silence, he added, “I really wish my wife could still scold me.”

His expression had stayed calm the entire time, like a branch snapped from a withered tree, or a pool of dead water without ripples or any trace of life. Xie Lian’s throat constricted, unable to swallow.

Moments later, he suggested in a small voice, “Why…why don’t you bury him?”

Lang Ying nodded. “Yeah. I wanted to pick a nice place. Here’s not bad. There are trees to block the sun, and water too. I’ll go back after burying him. Thanks for your water.”

He coughed a few times and bent down again, continuing to dig with his hands.

Xie Lian mumbled softly, “No, don’t thank me…don’t thank me, don’t.”

Just then, Feng Xin and Mu Qing arrived, and they were greeted with the confusing sight of one person digging a hole and another watching in a daze. Xie Lian wasn’t in the mood to speak and just kept muttering a few incoherent words. It was some time before Xie Lian remembered that simply giving water wasn’t enough; this man was returning to Yong’an. Thus, his hand went back into his sleeve and rummaged around. Finally finding what he was looking for, he passed it over.

“Here, take this.”

Lang Ying stopped and looked closely at the item in Xie Lian’s hand. It was a deep red pearl no bigger than a fingernail, its luster smooth and sleek, polished and brilliant and soul-stirringly beautiful. Even if he didn’t know what it was, a simple glance made it obvious this little thing was invaluable.

This was in fact the remaining red coral pearl earring that Xie Lian had worn during the Shangyuan Heavenly Ceremonial Procession three years before. That pearl had left a deep impression on Mu Qing, so the moment he saw it, his face changed.

Lang Ying didn’t reject it. He took it directly, as if the proper manners and concerns of a normal person had long since left him.

“Thanks.”

He carefully tucked the pearl into his belt, then he removed the satchel on his back and gently laid it into the pit he’d dug.

“Dad will come back very soon to visit you.”

Finished, he solemnly pushed the earth back to cover the satchel. Xie Lian put his hand on his forehead and closed his eyes.

A moment later, the young man strode away.

Feng Xin was bewildered. “Your Highness, what did he bury here? He said ‘Dad’? He buried someone?”

Mu Qing was concerned with something else. “Your Highness, I looked into what happened. Yong’an has never been a wealthy place; their temples and shrines are few in number. It seems they also have a local rule where those who don’t offer donations can’t pray, so those who’ve visited the Temple of the Crown Prince have all been wealthy. The suffering poor can’t even enter…”

Xie Lian didn’t respond to the report. He said in a dark voice, “You two, go to Yong’an and see what the situation is. I will go meet the state preceptor and ask him exactly what’s going on.”

He had never looked this upset before. His two subordinates didn’t dare to be negligent; they acknowledged his command and departed an instant later. Xie Lian himself turned and raced in the direction of Mount Taicang.

It appeared that the situation in Yong’an could only be a major disaster, not a small disturbance. Even if he himself couldn’t hear the voices of prayer, it hardly meant those at the imperial palace were so uninformed!

Chapter 30:
God of Heaven Observes Mortal Matters

MOUNT TAICANG, the Crown Prince Summit.

It was the time of the day when the crowds of visitors could no longer linger and were asked to leave the Royal Holy Temple. The sounds of chanting sutras echoed in waves from within the Palace of Xianle, and over a thousand cultivators were conducting their evening lessons with the four state preceptors leading the service beneath the feet of the fifteen-meter-high golden divine statue.

Within the Temple of the Crown Prince, innumerable offering lamps lined the walls on both sides from floor to ceiling. Xie Lian descended from the sky, landed lightly on the altar, and took a seat right before his own statue.

He waved, and a light breeze blew from out of nowhere, making the countless lamps spin gently, their lights blurring. The cultivators looked up and began to whisper in awe among themselves.

The state preceptor, who was sitting slumped with his eyes closed, suddenly blinked them open. “That’ll be it for today. You are all dismissed.”

The cultivators rose to their feet and left. The other three deputy state preceptors couldn’t see Xie Lian’s true form, but they could guess that some being had descended, so they also departed the hall and closed the temple doors behind them. Once those tall doors were shut, Xie Lian immediately began to speak, unable to wait another second.

“State Preceptor, did you know about the drought in Yong’an? There’s been no word from Father, so did something happen at court? Or is he simply unaware of the exact situation?”

Heavenly officials were not permitted to show themselves before mortals without explicit permission from on high. But there was only one exception to the rule, and that was appearing before high-level cultivators such as state preceptors or religious ministers. Those who had cultivated to certain levels were representatives of heavenly officials in the Mortal

Realm, and this was why Xie Lian could speak directly to the state preceptor. The “no prostrating within the Temple of the Crown Prince” rule was thus dictated through the mouth of the state preceptor from Xie Lian.

He had originally thought there was some sort of extreme circumstance—an exceptional issue the king couldn’t extricate himself from to handle the disaster in Yong’an, something that had tied his hands, or something that had prevented him from realizing that things were so deadly serious.

Unexpectedly, however, the state preceptor replied, “His Majesty the King is in satisfactory health, nothing major has happened, and he knows very well of what’s happening in Yong’an.”

Xie Lian was taken aback. “Then how come in all the times Father’s visited the Royal Holy Temple, I’ve never heard him pray for Yong’an once? Not even a word?”

Even if he didn’t get along well with his father, he also knew that the king was not a fatuous ruler. While the man revered hierarchy, saw himself as the son of the heavens above the common folk, that didn’t mean he was indifferent to the plight of refugees.

The state preceptor replied, “This has nothing to do with His Majesty. I am the one who advised that neither he nor the queen mention Yong’an in their prayers.”

“Why…?” Xie Lian demanded.

“Because it’s pointless,” the state preceptor stated.

Xie Lian was shocked. “What do you mean, ‘pointless’?”

He paused for a moment and worked over the state preceptor’s words in his mind.

“Are you saying that because I’m a martial god with no control over droughts, telling me would be pointless? I may be a martial god, but I’m also the Crown Prince of Xianle—or did you forget? My people are mired in misery! How can I sit back and do nothing?”

After a thought, he continued, “The priority right now is to save and settle the disaster victims. Please speak to my father on my behalf and tell him to stop constructing these temples; there are already too many Temples of the Crown Prince in this kingdom, I don’t need all of them. And those golden statues—they could be melted down to help allocate funds for the disaster. Yong’an is to the west, and they need water, so let’s dig a river and divert water from the east to irrigate the crops and nourish the land…”

As he spoke, the state preceptor only shook his head, muttering to himself, “Too early, too early.”

Xie Lian didn’t understand. “What’s too early?”

“Do you understand now why I said you shouldn’t ascend too early?” the state preceptor asked. “It’s because your people haven’t died out yet.”

“…” Xie Lian’s eyes widened, and his voice grew dark and furious. “State Preceptor! What…what are you saying?! What do you…what do you mean my people haven’t died out yet?!”

“You’ve already become a god, but you can’t forget who you were as a mortal; you’re unable to let go and differentiate between the two realms,” the state preceptor replied. “You’re involving yourself, but you are also powerless, and the results will be an utter mess.”

Xie Lian was seated upon the altar and the state preceptor stood below; even though it was obvious Xie Lian was the one looking down, when the state preceptor spoke, it was as if he were the one above.

“How can I be powerless? As long as I act, there will be results. Every little bit counts. Even if I can only save one person, that’s still better than indifference and inaction. If you will not speak to my father on my behalf, then I will seek him out myself,” Xie Lian said.

He shot to his feet, but the state preceptor seized a corner of his sleeve, yelling.

“Come back! Do you know why heavenly officials aren’t allowed to show themselves before mortals at will? A law that’s existed for thousands of years exists for a reason! Don’t do anything foolish!”

Xie Lian whipped his head back. “Then what *can* I do?! I can’t do this, I can’t do that; State Preceptor, there are people dying right now in *my* land! Are gods not called gods because they can save people?! If I don’t appear now, then when can I appear?! What will my ascension even mean?!”

The state preceptor held him down, sighing. “Your Highness, *hahh*, Your Highness. Do you know what I’ve seen?”

Xie Lian calmed himself before sitting again. “Please enlighten me.”

The state preceptor stared hard at him. “I’ve seen your future, and it’s pitch black.”

Xie Lian looked him straight in the eyes. “You must be mistaken. I only like to wear white.”

“I worry that not only will you be unable to save your people, they will turn around and drag you down from the divine altar,” the state preceptor said.

“My people are not like that; they can clearly recognize what is right and what is wrong. If I cannot save them, then there’s no meaning to me being on this altar anyway,” Xie Lian replied.

It was a good while before the state preceptor sighed again. “What your father has done can’t be called right, but it can’t be called wrong either. You said to allocate funds, but it’s not like your father hasn’t tried—you can go see how effective that’s been. And you said to dig a river to divert the waters—go to that river yourself and determine whether it can be done.”

Xie Lian bowed his head. “I understand. Thank you, State Preceptor.”

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Upon leaving Mount Taicang, he headed westward and arrived at the city of Yong’an within the Kingdom of Xianle.

In the twenty years of his life, Xie Lian had never imagined the sun could be so scorching and deadly. With every step, he could feel how unbearably hot and dry the earth was; it was like the air around him was contorted with it. In the blazing sunlight, the land had cracked into broken chunks that looked horrifyingly aged. There was a deep gutter by the roadside that seemed to have been a river once, but now it was dry to the bottom, and the blackened riverbed emitted a strange stench. He walked for a long time and didn’t see a single paddy field. Maybe there had been fields once, but at this point they were unrecognizable.

Xie Lian looked around as he walked. That hot, dry breeze blew his long hair into a mess, but he was too preoccupied to care.

Just then, someone suddenly called for him from behind.

“Your Highness!”

Xie Lian turned his head and saw two figures in black approaching in a rush. It was Feng Xin and Mu Qing.

Xie Lian cut straight to the point. “Any news?”

Feng Xin flapped the front of his shirt to fan himself. “Yes. Over the past two years, the whole western territory has been going through a water shortage, and things finally blew up this year. Yong’an is the worst affected—the river’s dry and the rain doesn’t fall, so the crops won’t grow. The wealthier families are still faring all right; as long as there’s money, food and water can be bought from elsewhere. However, most of the wealthy have already moved to the eastern territories. Those who are left are either poor or unable to survive the move.”

Xie Lian knitted his brows. “The state preceptor said my father didn’t just sit back, that he gave the order to send disaster relief, so why is it still so serious?”

“When funds go through government checkpoints, each checkpoint skims off a little bit to line their own pockets, until finally there’s nothing left. Of course it’s still this serious,” Mu Qing said coldly. “If it were up to me, I would’ve preferred not to send anything at all, rather than feed those parasites.”

Xie Lian’s breath hitched. Forcing his anger down, he stated, “I will tell those parasites to regurgitate every single penny they’ve devoured.”

“Your Highness, did you forget?” Mu Qing reminded him. “This is not within your purview. Heavenly officials can’t interfere in mortal matters. A meter of ice isn’t formed by a single cold day. His Majesty the King is the one responsible for the Mortal Realm, this is his duty—if even he can’t manage it, how will you fix it when you’ve already got your hands full of countless prayers from your devotees? If you concern yourself with this and that, in the end you'll only bring problems upon yourself. Besides, that would only cure the symptoms, not the root cause."

Feng Xin blocked out the sun with his hand. "To cure the root cause, there needs to be water. For now, why doesn't Your Highness have the state preceptor tell His Majesty to divert the waters from the east to the west?"

Xie Lian shook his head. "I already suggested that to the state preceptor."

"What did he say?" Feng Xin asked.

"…" Xie Lian was momentarily stumped. "That it's not feasible, more or less. But I realize now that it really can't be done. To redirect the water, we'd need to dig the river, but something like digging a canal would require mass conscription, but who knows how many years that'd take, and it'd only exhaust the people and the treasury. It won't work."

Feng Xin nodded. "True enough. Distant waters can't extinguish nearby fires."

Xie Lian hummed. "But if this can't be solved by mortal means, maybe we can try divine methods. I heard there's been a change of Rain Masters in recent years. The newly ascended Rain Master seems like a reclusive person, but I'll see if I can pay a visit and request that eastern waters be moved westward as rain.

Since Xie Lian's ascension, he never paid any personal visits to any other heavenly officials—aside from greeting Jun Wu—and never tried to purposely befriend anyone, treating all equally within the spiritual communication array. His taking the initiative to pay visits was thus a rare occasion.

Mu Qing, however, objected. "No."

Xie Lian turned to regard him. "Why not?"

"Your Highness, I've investigated thoroughly. The truth is, in these past two years, it's not just Yong'an or the western territory that's been experiencing a shortage of water but the entire Kingdom of Xianle. The eastern territory is close to the sea and is surrounded by lakes and ravines, so it's not as obvious and hasn't become an issue yet. But overall, the amount of water and rain has significantly decreased from previous levels."

Xie Lian's eyes widened as Mu Qing continued, "If we really dug a canal or used rain to move water from the east to the west, it might temporarily relieve Yong'an, but it wouldn't save it completely. It would only help them hang on by a thread. Meanwhile, it could very well doom the eastern territory."

Xie Lian's heart seized. "And most of the population of Xianle, along with its most prosperous places, are in the east… It's more than three times the size of the west and contains the imperial capital. If a drought were to happen there…"

Feng Xin immediately understood as well. "The consequences would be significantly more serious than in Yong'an, and the number of deaths greater!"

Mu Qing nodded, his expression solemn. "It would give birth to a much larger disaster."

Xie Lian took a deep breath. "So, is that what the state preceptor meant when he said what Father did wasn't right but wasn't wrong either? That he made this choice?"

"Which is why, Your Highness, that no one praying for help at your temple was a good thing," Mu Qing said. "Leave it to His Majesty to decide what to do."

Xie Lian didn't respond. He looked back.

The entire time they walked, every person he saw was nothing but skin and bones; men and children had their upper bodies bare, rows of ribs visible and clear on their torsos, and the women had dead eyes and faces empty of life. No one moved much—they didn't have the energy. The foul stench of death hung over everything. It made one want to scream, to escape this decaying earth and return to the glory of the flourishing imperial capital.

It was a long time before he finally spoke. "You two stay here and assist me, deliver as much water as you can. Let me think about this."

"Fine. Go and think it over carefully," Feng Xin said. "Just let me know what to do once you've decided."

Xie Lian patted his shoulder and then turned to leave.

Behind him, Mu Qing said quietly, “Your Highness, do think this through carefully. We can help for ten days, maybe twenty, but not a year or two. We can save one hundred lives but not a hundred thousand. You’re a martial god, after all, not the god of water. And even if you were the god of water, you couldn’t create water from nothing. If we can’t fix the root of this problem, we won’t be able to keep it going; our plans are inadequate, like using a cup of water to douse a burning cart of firewood.”

Chapter 31:
To Meet You in the Mortal Realm, to Find Flowers Beneath the Rain

XIE LIAN BRIEFLY PAUSED IN HIS STEP at Mu Qing's words, but in the end he didn't turn back. He waved, then continued on.

When he returned to the capital of Xianle, Xie Lian headed straight for the imperial palace.

He didn't know why he was going there, since it wasn't exactly to see his parents. And *that* wasn't because he was a heavenly official and forbidden to show himself before mortals. After he first left home and in all the years that had passed, he didn't really know how to start conversations with his parents anymore—a common sentiment for every child in the world. Thus, he concealed himself and ran haphazardly about the palace he was so familiar with. But His Majesty the King was nowhere to be found. It was only when he went to Qifeng Palace that he came across his father and mother.

The two had just dismissed the palace attendants and were chatting between themselves. The queen sat on the side of the bed. The mask that she was fiddling with was the very one that Xie Lian had worn three years ago at the Heavenly Ceremonial Procession. The shape of the golden mask had been carefully molded to Xie Lian's features, which was why it had fit him so perfectly and comfortably when he had worn it. When others saw the mask, the degree of similarity with his real face was almost frightening.

"Stop playing around with that and come massage my temples," the king chided.

Even though the king and the queen kept up an act of perfection in front of the people, Xie Lian had seen clearly from a young age that behind the scenes, his parents bickered and nagged each other like any other normal married couple. The queen put down the mask as expected and moved to the king's side to help rub his temples.

She combed through his hair and suddenly remarked, “You’ve got more white in your hair again.”

Xie Lian took a closer look. True to his mother’s words, his father’s hair was graying on the sides, and it aged him a few years.

Didn’t father visit the Royal Holy Temple to pray just a little while ago? he wondered. *His hair was still black then. How did it go gray so suddenly?*

The queen handed the king a copper mirror, but he pushed it away. “No need to see. Just dye it black again before we next visit Mount Taicang.”

It was then that Xie Lian realized, *His hair didn’t go gray recently! It grayed a long time ago, it’s just that he’s been dyeing it black every time he comes to see me. I’ve been too occupied listening to the prayers of my devotees and running around; I rarely made time to come back and visit. That’s why I didn’t suspect anything.*

This conclusion filled Xie Lian with guilt. For once, he was glad his parents couldn’t see him.

As the queen massaged the king’s head, she scolded, “I told you to rest early every evening, yet you never listen to me, and you even accuse me of nagging you day and night. Now look at how unsightly you’ve become. If our son saw, he definitely wouldn’t want anything to do with you.”

The king huffed. “Ever since your son grew up and spread his wings, he stopped caring about me anyway.” Despite his words, he still couldn’t help but take a peek at the copper mirror by the bedside, and he grumbled, “I don’t look that bad. Isn’t it still the same face?”

Xie Lian was stunned in spite of himself. He’d never seen this side of his father before, complaining about him behind his back with such petulance. He couldn’t help but smile.

The queen obviously felt the same, and she held back her laughter. “Okay, okay, it’s not that awful. Your health is more important than the heavens, so rest early today.”

The king shook his head. “I cannot. A number of people from Yong’an have settled in the capital lately. If they want to come, that’s fine, but they just have to make a nuisance of themselves and make the people uneasy. It’s a tricky situation.”

As it turned out, his father’s hair was going gray because of the drought in Yong’an. An indescribable misery seized Xie Lian. The queen nodded.

“Rong-er told me he met someone from Yong’an today, as well. Apparently, the man tried to steal money from the temple. How frightening.”

The king was solemn. “Indeed, it’s shocking. If there were only tens or hundreds of them, that would be fine, but if all hundred thousand of them came here to scurry about the capital, the impact would be unimaginable.”

The queen debated for a moment before she said, “That might not happen. If they follow the law and keep to themselves, then let them come.”

“As the king of a nation, how can I take a risk on something that ‘might not happen’?” he replied. “They absolutely cannot come. Looking after a few more people is not as simple as placing a few more sets of chopsticks down at the table. There are many complications involved that you don’t understand. This conversation is over.”

“Okay, let’s not talk about this anymore,” the queen soothed. “I didn’t understand the things you spoke of to begin with. If only our son were still here—then he could at least help take some of the burden off of you.”

The king humphed. “Him? What could he do? As long as he doesn’t cause me any more worries, that’s good enough.”

At the mention of Xie Lian, the king seemed to liven up again. “That son of yours, he’s already in his teens, but he was raised like a princess. Even if he learned about everything that’s happening, it won’t do any good. It would just add to his worries for no reason. Let him keep flying in the sky—it’s best if he doesn’t know anything. He should do his own thing. He’s not the crown prince anymore, so there’s no need for him to care about matters in the Mortal Realm. He loves to fly, so let him fly to his heart’s content.”

Xie Lian listened silently as his father grew increasingly excited in recounting his faults. With a knowing smile on her face, the queen nudged the king.

"Now you call him a princess. Aren't you the one who spoiled our princess since he was young? And now you want to blame it all on me?" She sighed. "That child is good at everything except missing home. He was already like this back when he was studying at the Royal Holy Temple; he'd only visit once every few months. It's worse now that he's ascended. We haven't seen him once in three years. Who knows if we'll ever see him again?"

Her complaint had the king turn around and start defending Xie Lian. "What would a woman know? The state preceptor said those were the laws of heaven. How can we still treat him like a common mortal? If you call your son back, you'll be weighing him down."

"I'm only saying," the queen quickly explained herself. "I won't make any demands in front of him." Then she muttered, "It's not so bad when I can look at the statues; they resemble him closely enough, and they're everywhere."

As he watched them for such a long time, an ache grew in Xie Lian's heart. It felt like there was a hard lump lodged in his throat, making it painful to swallow. He couldn't bear to stay hidden any longer, yet he couldn't reveal himself. It wasn't because he was afraid of breaking heaven's laws, but rather because, even now, he still didn't know what to say. He didn't have any solutions for the situation in Yong'an. If he were to suddenly appear, it would only cause his parents more agitation and stress.

He quickly retreated from the imperial palace. The moment he was outside, Xie Lian drew in several deep breaths, and it was only then that he was finally able to calm down. He steadied himself and pulled himself together. Then, deciding that action was better than standing around sighing, he cast a spell and transformed himself into a plainly dressed young cultivator. He ran around the capital, digging for information and recording his findings. After a full day of work and traveling all over, he finally got the answers he wanted.

Indeed, the water level of every lake and river within the Xianle capital was lower than in previous years. Back when he was still at the

Royal Holy Temple, there were a few times when he snuck down the mountain to play. As he had rowed his boat happily along the largest river that crossed through the Kingdom of Xianle, the water level was just a bit short of the levee, but now it was several meters below. And the residents of the city said it had been like that for a while; this wasn't something that had happened overnight. Before this, Xie Lian hadn't paid much attention, but now that he knew to look, he was shocked to see all the warning signs so clearly. He had originally hoped there'd been some mistake in Mu Qing's report and thus decided to come and see for himself. But now he couldn't deny that Mu Qing had never let him down before.

Once the situation was confirmed, Xie Lian stood there in a trance by the riverside, deep in contemplation. Pedestrians passed behind from time to time; some nodded and smiled, others looked on curiously, but most went about happily minding their own business. He'd lost track of how long he'd been standing there when quietly, clouds gathered from the edge of the skies, and a *pitter-patter* sounded from all around. It had started to rain.

Numerous pedestrians on the street looked up to the sky.

"What bad luck! It's raining, let's hurry back!"

"Yeah! How annoying!"

Plip plop plip plop. Raindrops beat down on Xie Lian's face and clothes, and he finally came to his senses.

"It's raining?" he muttered to himself.

When the people in the capital saw rain, they dropped everything to find shelter. Heavens knew how many on the other side of Xianle would die for a rainstorm like this. A group of people with umbrellas ran past, and when they saw Xie Lian standing there alone getting soaked by the rain, they beckoned him along.

"Young cultivator, why aren't you getting out of the rain? It's really coming down!"

In his haze of confusion, Xie Lian somehow started running along too and found himself seeking shelter under a long roof. Soon after, the group tucked away their umbrellas and broke out in laughter.

"Thank goodness I brought an umbrella with me when I saw it was cloudy, or else I would've been a drowned rat!"

"It hasn't rained for a long time, right? The storm is way overdue, so it's going to be a big one."

"Oh my goodness, look! It really is pouring harder! It's going to turn into a deluge at this rate!"

The raindrops beat down on the ground, shattering and splattering outwards. These people spoke in such a familiar, endearing accent, and Xie Lian felt in his heart that this was his home—this was the place where he was born and grew up, and these were the citizens he knew.

As the chitchat continued, the rain gradually lightened. A few urged, "We should hurry and go while it's eased up!"

The men opened their umbrellas and stepped out from under the roof one after another. Xie Lian still stood where he was, however. A couple of them glanced back, and after a brief discussion among themselves, one came over and handed him a worn umbrella.

"Young cultivator, can't you go back?" he asked politely. "It's still pouring, so why don't you take this umbrella?"

Xie Lian snapped out of his daydream. "Thank you very much, but what about you?"

A few people from the group in the rain called out, "We've got more umbrellas that we can all squeeze under. Let's go, let's go!"

Urged by his companions, the man stuffed the umbrella in Xie Lian's hand and ran back. The pattering sounds of their footsteps slowly faded away in the distance as Xie Lian stood there for a while longer, holding on to the umbrella. Suddenly, he caught a glimpse of an inconspicuous shrine not too far away. He opened his umbrella and walked toward it in the rain. Upon a closer look, the two sides of the small shrine doors were written with the verses, "Body in the abyss, heart in paradise." As it turned out, this was a Shrine of the Crown Prince.

Since eight thousand temples had been raised in only three years, it was natural that not every one of them was as extravagant and awe-inspiring as the one on Mount Taicang. Among them there were quite a few that were built by people's grassroots efforts to help achieve that lofty number and join in on the excitement. Not only were there no donation boxes here, there were also no temple attendants. The only things that this shrine had were a clay statue and a couple of offering plates filled with assorted fruit and refreshments. His more conscientious believers would come by once in a while to freshen the place up a little, and that alone sufficed for a shrine.

To think he'd find a Shrine of the Crown Prince in such a well-hidden, inconspicuous nook! Without stepping in, Xie Lian could already make out what could be described as a charmingly tacky crown prince statue, wearing gaudy clothing, and with a broad, silly smile on its big, round, powdery-white face. The statue was practically a big doll. If his mind weren't so weighed down by his own thoughts, Xie Lian definitely would've laughed out loud.

In the past three years, Xie Lian had seen at least three thousand, if not five thousand, crown prince statues. However, not a single one of them looked exactly like him—even the ones closest to the mark were only about two thirds of the way there. As for the rest, they were all either too ugly or too beautiful. Most of the divine statues of other heavenly officials were too ugly, yet Xie Lian had the exact opposite problem. There were some that were beautiful beyond recognition, to the point that it embarrassed him.

He didn't really take a close look at that clay statue at first, his eyes merely sweeping across the area, but a snow-white blur unexpectedly caught his eye and grabbed his attention.

Grasped in the left hand of that crude, clay crown prince statue was a flower that was white as snow.

Crystal dew clung to the delicate, pure-white petals. A wisp of its fresh fragrance wafted in the air, the scent lovely and endearing. The signature pose of crown prince statues was "Sword in One Hand, Flower in the Other," but the flower held in the left hand would, of course, be a finely crafted flower of gold, gems, or jade. This was the first time Xie Lian had seen a real flower clasped in his statue's hand, and he couldn't help but lean in for a better look.

After examining it, he realized that this crown prince statue had probably held a clay flower once upon a time. Whether it fell due to the sculptor’s poor skills or if someone had intentionally plucked it as a prank, only a small hole remained in the left fist—and that little white flower had been placed in this hole. If there was a believer who had picked a flower specially to fill the vacancy, they were a most conscientious believer indeed.

Xie Lian’s thoughts came to a halt when he heard hurried footsteps. He didn’t look back immediately. Instead, he hid his physical form and lightly leapt onto the altar with umbrella in hand, then turned around to look down.

A young boy, no older than twelve or thirteen, barged in from the gray, foggy rain outside. He was soaked from head to toe, dressed in filthy old clothes, and his face was covered in equally filthy bandages. His right fist was clutched tightly over his left, like he was protecting something important, and he only opened his hands when he entered the shrine.

A single tiny flower, as white as snow, bloomed quietly in his palms.

Xie Lian *hmm*-ed softly as if he had just remembered something.

A face wrapped in layers of bandages inevitably reminded him of the child he had met three years ago, though he couldn’t be sure of this boy’s identity. Pessimistically, could that child really still be alive three years after fleeing Mount Taicang?

Just then, the boy came forward. He lifted himself up on tiptoe and swapped the flower on the clay statue with the one in his hands. From atop the altar, Xie Lian could see it as clear as day; the petals of this new flower were fuller and even more delicate, the flower more radiant. From the strong fragrance, it was clear that this flower was freshly picked. Could this boy be visiting this lonely shrine every day to provide a fresh flower for this clay statue?

Moreover, after offering the flower, the boy stood in front of the clay crown prince statue. Unlike everyone else, who stubbornly insisted on kneeling, he pressed his hands together and silently prayed while standing. He actually followed Xie Lian’s wishes.

It had been three years. Among all of Xie Lian’s followers who had prayed, he could count government officials, nobles, names that were known across the land and talents who would impress the heavens. And yet

Xie Lian felt the sincerest of them all was this child who looked barely over thirteen, and who had probably been barred entry to those fancier golden temples simply because of his humble clothing and had no choice but to pay his respects at this simple shrine.

Truly, an indescribable feeling.

Just then, more splashing footsteps came from outside the shrine. A rowdy group of children with umbrellas dashed past. At first, Xie Lian thought that they were only passing by, but they unexpectedly circled back. They clapped and acted like they had discovered something extraordinary.

“Wow, wow. The ugly freak got kicked out again!”

Although these kids were all around the same age as the boy in the shrine, every one of them was taller than him and looked like their parents fed them well. There was probably a holiday coming up, since they were all dressed in new clothes and shoes. As they splashed playfully in the puddles by the shrine entrance, their innocent smiles were full of life and void of any malicious intent. It was as if they didn’t really understand that “ugly freak” was a bad term and didn’t realize that their words would be hurtful. They probably thought it was funny. The boy clenched his fist, but that fist was so small that it wasn’t threatening at all.

The kids by the door teased and teased. “Hey, ugly freak, are you sleeping at this shrine again tonight? Watch out, your mom is gonna beat the crap outta you when you get home!”

Xie Lian frowned. The boy’s one eye flashed with anger under the bandages. He raised his fists and yelled furiously.

“I don’t have a home! I don’t have a mom! She’s not my mom! Get out! Get out! Keep talking and I’m gonna beat the crap outta you!”

None of the kids were scared, and they stuck out their tongues. “You wanna bet? Careful, we might tell your dad again and have him teach you a lesson!”

A few children even gave a knowing wink. “Oh, right, you don’t have a mom because your mom didn’t want you. You don’t have a home because your family doesn’t want anything to do with you. That’s why you have to sleep in this crappy shrine…”

Before they could finish, the boy let out a cry and lunged at them.

For such a scrawny kid, he sure could pack a punch. That loud war cry sent a couple of the kids running scared, but the one who was now tangled up in a fight with him yelled at those who fled, “What’s there to be scared of?! There’re more of us!”

With that, the ones who wanted to run away returned and joined the fight, pulling at the boy’s hands and feet. Xie Lian really couldn’t just sit and watch anymore. With a wave of his hand, an invisible force shot out of nowhere and separated the boys. Then a powerful wave of puddle water surged up from the ground and knocked the pack of bullying kids off their feet.

In the end, they were still kids. After being inexplicably sent tumbling and gulping mouthfuls of muddy water as they did, their new clothes were completely soaked and they were even filthier and uglier than the boy they had been mocking. Their boisterous laughter was replaced with loud wailing. They crawled to their feet and ran off sniffling with umbrellas in their hands.

Xie Lian shook his head. The duty of martial gods was to ward off evil ghosts and bring protection and peace, and here he was getting tangled up in a juvenile dispute. Even though he had chased away the wrongdoers, he didn’t feel accomplished at all. His gaze returned to the young boy.

During that scuffle, the bandages on the boy’s head had been partially yanked off, giving a peek at the other half of his face. It was quite swollen, covered in black and blue bruises. It was obvious that these injuries hadn’t been caused by the brawl just now. Before Xie Lian could get a better look, the boy had already rewrapped his bandages without a word. He sat down by the clay statue’s feet and hugged his knees close.

Xie Lian had originally come to this crown prince shrine due to its convenience, and he was planning to summon Feng Xin and Mu Qing for some important discussions. But who could’ve expected that he’d come upon this little one? He was drawn in despite himself. Once the summons was sent, he crouched down beside the boy and stared. Not long after, a grumbling sound came from the boy’s stomach. The offering plate still held a few pieces of fruit and other refreshments—dried out and probably not particularly tasty, but better than nothing. Xie Lian picked one and gently tossed it toward the boy.

The moment he was hit by the fruit, the young boy wrapped his arms around his head and curled up defensively, as if he'd been hit by a rock and was bracing for more to follow. But after a while, he looked around and realized it was only a fruit, and that there wasn't anyone nearby. Hesitantly, he picked up the fruit, dusted it off a few times against his clothes, and returned it to the offering plate. Surprisingly, he would rather endure hunger than eat the offerings from the plate.

After that, he walked toward the door and peered at the heavy downpour outside of the shrine as if debating whether to venture out for food. However, the rain was coming down too hard. Since he didn't want to be drenched again, he walked back and curled up on the ground to sleep at the clay statue's feet.

Just then, Feng Xin and Mu Qing stepped out from the back of the shrine, drawn by the summons.

With weary disapproval, Feng Xin said, "Your Highness, how did you find such a small crown prince shrine? Why did you send out a call from here?" He looked down and suddenly noticed that he'd almost stepped on the curled-up figure on the ground and blurted out, "The fuck is this kid doing here?!"

Mu Qing also looked down, inspecting the child closely. He immediately asked, "Your Highness, is this the child who ran from Mount Taicang three years ago?"

Xie Lian shook his head. "I can't be certain. I don't know what his name was, nor what he would look like now."

While the three chatted around the unsuspecting child, the boy turned. As he wiped his face, Xie Lian realized there was blood running down his nose and from the corner of his mouth. Xie Lian felt even more strongly that he couldn't just leave him like this.

"Why don't we have the child leave first," Xie Lian said. "It's getting dark. This shrine isn't a good place to spend the night."

"Do you think he has nowhere else to go?" Feng Xin wondered. "If that's the case, then I'm afraid this is the only place where he could spend the night.”

“He has a home, though the situation there might not be great,” Xie Lian said. “Even so, this shrine isn’t any better. He has to leave so we can find him something to eat. He’s also injured.”

Mu Qing spoke up, “Your Highness, please excuse my frankness, but we don’t have time to bother with these minor things right now. Did you call us here because you’ve made a decision?”

No heavenly official of the Upper Court would accept every prayer from every one of their devotees without exception. There were millions of followers in the world, and if heavenly officials had to attend to every single one, it would exhaust them all into early graves. This was why, every so often, they would turn a blind eye to minor or less impactful wishes and pretend they heard nothing to lessen the workload.

Maybe it was due to Xie Lian’s youth—how he was bursting with energy and passion—that he had yet to properly learn how to adapt his priorities.

After some thought, he walked toward the entrance of the tiny shrine, carrying the umbrella that was gifted to him earlier by those pedestrians on the street.

Xie Lian slowly opened the umbrella. The falling raindrops pitter-pattered hard over its surface. The boy on the ground heard the noise and thought that someone had entered and shifted slightly—but he then seemed to realize he didn’t care whether someone had come or not, and he lay back down again. Xie Lian placed the opened umbrella by the entrance. When the boy noticed that the sound persisted, he finally found it strange enough to rise to his feet and go take a look. There he found a red umbrella leaning on the ground under the rain, like a lonesome, blooming crimson flower. He froze in surprise.

Watching the boy rush forward to grab the umbrella, Mu Qing lectured, “Your Highness, you’ve done more than enough. It’ll complicate things needlessly if you’re too obvious and he finds out.”

Before Xie Lian could reply, the young boy rushed back in and shouted from behind them, “Your Highness!”

The three gods almost jumped in surprise and turned their heads. Cradling the umbrella in his arms, the boy’s eye was reddened and filled with emotion. He lifted his head and shouted to the clay statue.

“Your Highness! Is that you?!”

Feng Xin was amazed at his deduction, as he didn’t know that Xie Lian had helped the boy chase away his bullies and had even chucked a fruit at him. “Li’l guy’s kinda smart, he actually figured it out.”

Mu Qing, on the other hand, clearly suspected that something must have happened. He eyed Xie Lian.

“If you’re here, please, answer my one question!” the boy begged.

From his place high atop the altar, Xie Lian heard countless pleas of “please appear before me” every day. When a sound becomes repetitive, it numbs the ear. Even so, hearing a plea like this, he still couldn’t help but drop the matter at hand and perk up his ears.

Beside him, Mu Qing cautioned, “Your Highness, leave it be.”

Xie Lian didn’t speak. The young boy squeezed the umbrella tightly with both hands, gritting his teeth.

“I’m suffering! Every day, I want to die. Every day, I want to kill everyone in this world, and then myself! I’m living in agony!”

From a boy who couldn’t be older than thirteen, such furious words probably sounded both laughable and pitiful. But hidden inside that tiny body was something explosive; something that sustained that roaring rage.

Feng Xin frowned. “What’s wrong with him? ‘Kill everyone in this world’? Is that really something a kid would say?”

“He’s still young,” Mu Qing replied flatly. “When he gets older, he’ll know that whatever he’s going through now isn’t anything.” After a pause he looked at Xie Lian. “There are too many suffering in this world. Take Yong’an’s drought, for example—name one Yong’an citizen who has it better than him. There’s no need to bother with this, Your Highness. Let’s focus on our priorities.”

“Perhaps,” Xie Lian said softly.

One person’s suffering probably looked insignificant to another.

The boy was still looking up at the statue. His eye was awfully red, yet there were no tears. With the umbrella in one hand, he reached out with the other and tugged on the clay statue’s robes and continued to plead for answers.

“What should I live for in this world? What does it mean to live?”

However, his questions were met by silence; there was not a soul to give him an answer. It seemed that the young boy had expected as much and slowly dropped his head.

To his surprise, a voice from above suddenly broke through the silence. “If you do not know how to live on anymore, then live for me.”

Neither Feng Xin nor Mu Qing had actually expected him to answer—and such an answer too! Their eyes widened. “Your Highness…?!”

The young boy’s head shot up, but there was no one there. There was only a soft, gentle voice coming from that clay statue.

“I have no answer to the question you asked. However, if you do not know the meaning of your life, then make me that meaning, and use me as your reason to live.”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing’s faces looked like they were about to explode, and both reached out to smother Xie Lian’s mouth, sputtering, “No more, Your Highness! You’re breaking the rules! The *rules*!”

But before they could fully cover his mouth, Xie Lian managed one last shout: “Thank you for your flower! It’s beautiful—I like it very much!”

Chapter 32:
Deficient Rain, the Rain Master Lends the Rain Hat

THE BOY WAS LEFT completely and utterly stunned.

Meanwhile, Feng Xin and Mu Qing both wished they could grow several more arms and legs to smother Xie Lian, and it was with great difficulty that they finally pulled him back.

And yet Xie Lian effortlessly pushed them away, declaring, “All right! I’m done! I know I broke the rules, but if you just pretend you heard nothing, all will be well. As long as you guys don’t say anything, no one will know. It’s just this once. Don’t say a word, do you hear me?”

Mu Qing looked like he’d been forced to eat a sock. He shook his head, muttering, “I can’t believe you… Saying something like ‘live on for me’ so unapologetically, you’re really…”

Xie Lian didn’t think what he said was much of anything at first, but hearing Mu Qing, now it sounded like it was quite something indeed, and he flushed bright red. Feng Xin immediately turned stern.

“Enough. His Highness already said not to speak of it, so why are you still talking about it?”

Yet the corners of his own lips were twitching as he spoke.

Xie Lian couldn’t stand it anymore and defended himself.

“What? What?! What I said clearly worked! Look!”

The boy sat in a daze for a long while, but when Xie Lian’s voice didn’t return, he rubbed hard at his face and reached for the offering plate on the altar. He held it in his arms and started eating the shriveled fruit and refreshments. He chewed and chewed vigorously, looking like a pitiful, vicious, small animal. Xie Lian bent down to watch him, a smile spreading across his face.

“You see?” he said to the other two. “It worked. He refused to eat before, but now he is.”

“All right, fine. It worked. Because you’re a god,” Mu Qing said.

“Right, right. It worked. Because you’re a god,” Feng Xin said as well.

“…”

Xie Lian straightened and grew serious once more.

“Indeed, I am a god. I called you both over because I have come to a decision.”

In an instant, the relaxed atmosphere turned heavy again.

“What do you want us to do?” Feng Xin asked, while Mu Qing queried, “Are we still getting involved?”

“We are. It’s simple,” Xie Lian said. “There is not enough water in the Kingdom of Xianle, so we will go to the kingdoms outside Xianle.”

“Go to other kingdoms?” Mu Qing asked, sounding doubtful. “Won’t they be too far? We’d need to borrow water-creating spiritual devices from some water god and impose on the territories of other heavenly officials. They might not be willing.”

Of course, Xie Lian had considered this. “I’m going to give it a shot. It’s still better than doing nothing. You two stay and keep watching over Yong’an. Lend assistance to the worst affected areas and I will return to the Upper Court. Any problem with that?”

“No problem. I’ve got your back,” Feng Xin said.

Mu Qing gave it some thought and asked, “But what about all the prayers from the devotees at the Temple of the Crown Prince, Your Highness?”

“I was getting to that,” Xie Lian replied. “Pick out the important ones and take care of them for me. The not-so-dire ones can wait.”

Mu Qing appeared rather reluctant but still acknowledged the command. “You’re the crown prince, so we’ll listen to you. But I’d advise not letting them wait too long.”

Xie Lian patted their shoulders. Feng Xin and Mu Qing bowed, then departed, leaving only Xie Lian and the child in the small shrine. As Xie Lian exited the shrine, he took a brief glance back. However, he didn’t stay a moment longer and rushed straight for the Heavenly Capital.

Initially, he had planned to pay a visit to any of the heavenly officials who controlled water, but strangely they seemed to all be on leave and absent from their respective residences in the Heavenly Capital. Only the Rain Master, who didn't reside in the heavens, was on active duty. As Xie Lian hurried down the streets of the capital, he bumped into a black-clad female official carrying an armload of scrolls.

She smiled. "Your Highness, you're finally back."

"Nangong, perfect timing," Xie Lian said, then immediately asked, "Do you know where the Rain Master's residence is located?"

This black-clad woman was named Nangong Jie, and she was a low-ranking civil official from the Middle Court. Since Xie Lian's ascension, she was the one taking care of much of the bureaucratic grunt work and related errands. She was well informed about current events and handled cases adeptly, so Xie Lian thought highly of her.

"The construction of Lord Rain Master's new palace isn't complete yet, but a temporary residence is situated in the Kingdom of Yushi in the South," Nangong Jie said. She gave him the address to the Rain Master's residence, then inquired further, "Why are you looking for Lord Rain Master?"

"Urgent business. Thanks for your help," Xie Lian said. He was about to leave but turned back and cleared his throat, sounding embarrassed. "Nangong, you're more familiar than I am with the heavenly officials of the Upper Court. Can you tell me if Lord Rain Master…likes anything in particular?"

When new heavenly officials ascended, the more astute ones would pay visits to the palaces of every official and greet them with gifts as a social salutation. This was pretty much an unspoken rule. However, Xie Lian had ascended too suddenly, and no one taught him when he first arrived. It was only afterward that the state preceptor reminded him, but by then it was already too late and it would have only made things awkward. Also, to a crown prince like Xie Lian it felt too much like backhanded bribery, and he didn't appreciate the practice; in the end, he decided to just go about things naturally, hoping for a chance to build relationships with the other officials through more genuine means.

It was an admirable idea—but now, as he turned back to it and proactively asked what a heavenly official would like, it sounded quite like he was about to bribe someone. He couldn't help but blush with shame, but he had no choice. The other gods who resided at the Heavenly Capital communicated through the spiritual communication array, which would have made negotiation much easier—but the Rain Master did not communicate in this manner. And Xie Lian didn't want other gods to misunderstand his intentions, to think that he was looking to borrow spiritual devices for nothing.

Nangong Jie immediately understood. "Regrettably, I'm afraid I can't help Your Highness in this matter. Lord Rain Master is quite low-key; I doubt there's anyone in the entire Heavenly Realm who knows the lord's personal interests, myself included. Sorry."

Xie Lian reddened. "No worries, don't take it to heart. Thanks."

"But if My Lord needs to, it won't hurt to simply pay a visit," Nangong Jie added. "By my understanding of Lord Rain Master's temperament, you might still be granted an audience."

Xie Lian thanked her again and followed her directions southward until he arrived at the temporary residence of the Rain Master.

It was a small village surrounded by green mountains and clear waters, a land of picturesque scenery—but Xie Lian had no mind to appreciate it. He crossed through the ridges of fields and finally saw a stone marker with the word "Rain" engraved on it. Logically speaking, after passing the stone marker, he would be in the temporary domain of the Rain Master, and those working within it should be the Rain Master's subordinates. But as Xie Lian walked, he only saw lush green fields all around. In the fields there were oxen mooing, mills turning, assiduous farmers planting rice stalks, and beside the fields there was a small, crooked, thatched cottage. There was neither trace nor sign of divinity, and Xie Lian wondered if he'd gone in the wrong direction. Wasn't this simply a small, impoverished farming village?

As he doubted himself, a black ox in a far field let out a long lowing noise, and another. Then it stood back on its hind legs, and its forelegs stretched out in order to remove the plow from its own back. That strong, solid body narrowed, the long oxen snout shrank, and in the blink of an eye it had transformed from a sleek black ox into a farmer, stripped to the waist.

The farmer was tall and strong, his muscles well defined and the contours of his face hard. His nose had a polished iron nose ring hooked through it like that of an ox, and a long grass stalk hung from his lips. The other farmers witnessed this extraordinary transformation but continued to work like it was nothing. Xie Lian concluded that no one here was mortal and approached, raising his folded hands in courtesy.

“Fellow cultivator, may I inquire whether this is the temporary residence of Lord Rain Master?”

The black ox farmer pointed to the field bank directly across and replied, “Yeah. Lord Rain Master lives there.”

“…”

Xie Lian looked around several times before confirming that the only thing in that pointed direction was indeed the thatched cottage. It looked like it would topple from a mere breeze, and it surely leaked on rainy days.

Even his most shabby, decrepit shrines looked solider and more respectable than that little cottage. Xie Lian amazed. They said the Lord Rain Master was of royal descent like himself, from the Kingdom of Yushi. It was for that very reason that he didn’t bring any precious gems or rare treasures as a greeting gift, thinking perhaps that the Rain Master felt the same way he did about those things—which was nothing. Why live in such destitution after ascension? Maybe it was another form of cultivation?

Mindful of his manners, Xie Lian thanked the farmer and approached the little cottage, calling with a loud, clear voice.

“Lord Rain Master, please forgive this Prince of Xianle for making an abrupt visit without prior notice.”

There was no response from within the cottage. The farmer ambled over, hauling the plow along after him.

“Oh? You’re that crown prince who ascended at age seventeen?”

“Regrettably,” Xie Lian said.

“Nothing regrettable about it, it’s just the truth,” the farmer said. “But Lord Rain Master doesn’t enjoy entertaining guests and was injured recently, so I’m afraid you won’t be received today.”

Xie Lian was disappointed at hearing this but still wanted to keep trying. “Then may I ask you to pass on a message for me? I have an urgent request. However, if Lord Rain Master should feel inconvenienced by it, I won’t persist.”

The farmer chuckled. “No need to pass on any word, we all know why you’re here. Feels bad, right? Having no water in Xianle.”

Xie Lian was taken aback. “You know of Xianle’s affairs, sir?”

“Of course I know,” the farmer said. “And that’s not limited to just those of us on this middle-of-nowhere mountain—right now, who doesn’t know that catastrophe is about to befall your Kingdom of Xianle? You don’t know anything about your own affairs, but everyone spectating understands what’s really going on, and they’re probably all enjoying the show, ha ha. You’re here to borrow the Rain Master’s spiritual device for disaster aid, right?”

Those were enlightening words. It was only then that Xie Lian realized: those heavenly officials in the Upper Court weren’t coincidentally all gone at the same time. They all knew what his intentions were and purposely shut their doors or left in advance to dodge him, to avoid being dragged into his mess.

He sighed. *Should I have paid everyone’s palaces a visit at the beginning? Would that have made it easier to find someone willing to assist among my peers?*

It was a depressing thought. He responded in a small voice, “That’s right. If I am causing trouble for the Rain Master, I will not pester any further.”

However, the farmer said, “Why won’t you pester? Because it’s shameful? This is about the survival of your kingdom—shouldn’t you pester us to death? Is it so hard to lower yourself and ask? Young people shouldn’t be rattled so easily. Let me say something unpleasant: Should Lord Rain Master help, it’s on account of kindness. If not, it’s on account of duty. Whether you’ll be lent that device is based on the lord’s mood, so if you don’t get what you want, don’t bother complaining about it later.”

Xie Lian knew that what he said made sense. But the situation was so dire, and the farmer’s tone so unfriendly, that a wave of anger rolled through him. He held his head higher and replied in an upright voice.

“I understand everything you are saying, and I would never complain behind anyone’s back, so why must you make assumptions about how I’ll react? I said I will not pester simply because I do not want to waste my time and cause trouble for Lord Rain Master in the process. But if Lord Rain Master would not feel inconvenienced, and all I need to do to borrow the spiritual device is be bothersome about it, then it would be nothing for me to offer up all eight thousand of my temples and kowtow a hundred times.”

The farmer burst out laughing. “You’re angry? You have the temper of a child. Here!”

He tossed something over; Xie Lian raised his hand and caught a grass-colored bamboo hat, the very one that the farmer previously had on his back.

“What is this?” Xie Lian asked.

“The thing you wanted to borrow,” the farmer explained. “Lord Rain Master already asked me to pass this to you before you came. Use it carefully. If you break it, we won’t forgive you.”

Xie Lian’s eyes widened. “Why?”

“Didn’t I already tell you?” the farmer asked. “The loan was based on the lord’s mood. Other heavenly officials won’t help you, so Lord Rain Master had to go against the flow. Whatever Lord Rain Master wants to do shall be done.”

“Thank you so much! Thank you!” Xie Lian cried.

“Don’t be too happy so soon, Your Highness,” the farmer added. “Lord Rain Master may have ascended before you, but has fewer devotees—and thus less power. And there are those recent injuries to consider. The loan of that thing is all you’ll get; the rest is up to you. Distant waters cannot quench nearby thirsts; the Rain Master’s Hat can move rain but not create water. There’s not enough water in your Xianle, so you must borrow from other kingdoms, and they may not be willing. Only the Kingdom of Yushi has had rain in abundance in recent years, and it is rather wealthy in that aspect. However, there is a great distance to be crossed between the two kingdoms, and every use of that hat will drain an enormous amount of your spiritual power. No matter how much you possess, there will come a day that it runs dry.”

Xie Lian was keenly aware of how difficult it was to lend one’s spiritual device to some random person. He bowed deeply to the thatched cottage.

“I am profoundly grateful that the Lord Rain Master would lend a helping hand. I will not forget this kindness—should there be anything I can do to help in the future, pray the Lord Rain Master does not hesitate to ask for me. Farewell!”

With the borrowed spiritual device in hand, Xie Lian immediately found a lake in the south and ladled out a large portion of its water with the Rain Master’s Hat. Crossing thousands of kilometers, he returned to Yong’an in Xianle. He found the worst-affected village, the Bay of Lang-Er, and flipped the bamboo hat over above the clouds.

Soon after, a short sprinkling of rain fell from the sky. Xie Lian jumped off the clouds and landed both feet on the ground. The half-dead villagers couldn’t believe their eyes; some rushed out of their homes to cheer under the rain, and others hurriedly brought out buckets of all sizes to collect the water.

Xie Lian sighed in relief at the sight of this, and he finally managed a smile. Just then, he heard a voice call out from afar.

“Your Highness!”

He turned and saw Mu Qing appear from behind a tree, his face dark. Seeing his gloomy expression, Xie Lian knew something was wrong.

“What is it? Did something happen?”

Chapter 33:
Closing the Capital Gates, Survival of Yong’an Barred

“YOUR HIGHNESS, what took you so long?” Mu Qing asked.

Xie Lian was taken aback. “Was I really gone that long?”

Traveling all over the heavens and earth, scooping up lake water, mounting clouds and making rain, all without care for day or night, Xie Lian hadn’t realized just how much time had passed.

“It’s been days!” Mu Qing exclaimed. “There’s a mountain of backed-up prayers from devotees at the Temple of the Crown Prince.”

Just then, Xie Lian felt the rain fading and extended a hand. “Did I not leave instructions for the two of you to handle the important ones first?”

“Of course we handled what we could,” Mu Qing replied. “But…but there are too many prayers that we don’t have the authority to manage. That’s why I asked Your Highness not to make them wait too long and to hurry back.”

As he finished speaking, the rain stopped. The rainstorm was much shorter than Xie Lian had expected, and he felt his heart sinking. As the clouds dispersed, the green bamboo hat came fluttering down, and Xie Lian caught it with both hands.

“But do you see this situation? I can’t pull myself away from here either.”

Mu Qing frowned. “Your Highness, did you manage to borrow the Rain Master’s spiritual device? Where did the water come from?”

“From the Kingdom of Yushi in the south,” Xie Lian replied.

“That far?” Mu Qing exclaimed. “How much power did it take to move water just once? And if you’re determined to keep watering Yong’an with these sparse storms, how will you keep up with your followers’ prayers?”

Even if he hadn’t said it aloud, Xie Lian understood. He was a martial god, and the devotees to the Temple of the Crown Prince were his foundation, the source of his spiritual power. His actions now were essentially abandoning that foundation, and if he wasn't careful, both sides would suffer. But what else could he do?

"I know," Xie Lian said. "But if things go on like this and a riot breaks out in Yong'an, the Temple of the Crown Prince will be affected sooner or later."

"That's already happened!" Mu Qing exclaimed.

Xie Lian was shocked. "What?!"

At that, Xie Lian rushed back to the imperial capital of Xianle. When he arrived at the Grand Avenue of Divine Might, a band of imperial soldiers clad in armor and wielding sharp weapons were marching a line of detained men down the road. The prisoners were unkempt, with their hands and head locked in cangues.[3] Citizens crowded both sides of the road, fury evident on every one of their faces. Feng Xin tensely gripped his black bow as if preparing for a riot at any moment.

"Feng Xin!" Xie Lian demanded sharply. "Who are those detainees? What crime did they commit? Where are they taking them?"

Hearing his voice, Feng Xin hurried over. "Your Highness! They're all people of Yong'an."

There were dozens of men in that line, all tall and gaunt, their skin tanned and dark from the sun. Behind the soldiers trailed several old men and a number of stricken women and children.

"The ones following behind are as well?" Xie Lian questioned.

"All of them," Mu Qing confirmed.

Over the past several months, at the height of the drought, Yong'an residents uprooted their lives and fled to the east in droves. When it was only a few dozen people it wasn't obvious, but the flow kept coming, and by now there were more than five hundred of them. When a massive, dense crowd like that gathered, it became quite the spectacle.

The people of Yong'an were strangers to this land with nothing to their names, and the moment they opened their mouths their dialects gave them away, so when they arrived at this strange, bustling city they naturally stuck together for comfort. After searching all over, they finally found an uninhabited green meadow within the imperial capital. Overjoyed, they built sheds and huts as temporary shelters.

Unfortunately, although the field was uninhabited, it was very dear to those of the imperial capital. The culture of Xianle was quite indulgent, and residents of the imperial capital were leaders in that lifestyle. Citizens would gather at that field to stroll, dance, sing poetry, paint, practice the art of the sword, and so on. Yong’an, on the other hand, had always been poor, so the temperament and culture of the citizens of this western land were completely opposite to those of the east. Because of this, citizens of the imperial capital often believed that they had the purest Xianle blood. And now, their elegant city had been overtaken by a large number of refugees, who filled the air with their strange smells and sounds—the constant disruption of laundry and campfires, the stench of stewing herbs and leftovers and sweat, the unending weeping. It made many nearby residents recoil with disgust, and their complaints were endless.

Some of the elder Yong’an leaders understood their predicament and wanted to move elsewhere, yet the imperial capital was already heavily populated. No matter where they went, it was crowded with people, and there wasn’t anywhere else that could settle so many. Furthermore, they had wounded people, sick people, old folks, and children, which made it infeasible to move frequently. They had no choice but to shamelessly yet cautiously cling to that meadow. As much as it displeased the people of the imperial capital, the refugees were still citizens of the same country; in light of the ongoing disaster, they tolerated the strangers’ presence.

Xie Lian had heard up to that point in the situation report when the band of soldiers arrived at the mouth of the marketplace with the Yong’an men in tow. The soldiers bellowed, “Kneel!”

Every one of the men looked indignant, but with blades at their throats, they had no choice but to kneel. When the crowd of capital citizens saw the men drop to their knees, some sighed, but others clearly felt vindicated.

“According to your report, both sides have tolerated each other thus far. So what happened today?” Xie Lian asked.

Before Feng Xin or Mu Qing could answer, a woman started wailing and crying from the crowd.

“You barbaric thieves! Never mind your sticky fingers—you beat my husband so badly that he can’t get up! If he doesn’t recover, I’ll make you pay!”

Next to her a number of people rushed to comfort her, and some pointed their fingers in reproach.

“Don’t you know how to behave when you’re living in other people’s territory?!”

“Yeah! You’re guests in our home, but you’ve made yourselves real comfortable, haven’t you? Thieves!”

One of the bound young men finally couldn’t take it anymore. “We already told you we didn’t steal anything!” he argued. “We didn’t throw the first punch either! Besides, we’ve got wounded people on our side too…”

“Stop talking!” a Yong’an elder admonished him.

The young man shut his mouth angrily.

“A dog went missing in the imperial capital,” Feng Xin explained. “There was an incident earlier where a Yong’an child stole and ate someone’s duck out of extreme hunger, so there were rumors that the dog was stolen and eaten by the Yong’an refugees too. A mob went to interrogate and then started a brawl when the ‘interrogation’ went south.”

Xie Lian was incredulous. “A riot over a dog? And they detained this many people?”

“Yes, over a dog,” Feng Xin said. “It blew up this badly because both sides have been putting up with each other for too long. Even petty things can become a big deal. Both sides swear that the other side started it, that it’s the other’s fault, and this nonsensical scuffle just got bigger and bigger.”

“Violent rioters shall see severe punishment!” a high-ranking soldier announced. “You are all sentenced to the cangue for public condemnation! Any further crimes are forbidden!”

After the sentencing, he stood down—and the next second, some of the crowd started hurling lettuce leaves and rotten eggs at the men of Yong’an. The old men who trailed behind started bowing to the crowd, crying for mercy.

“We apologize, everyone! We apologize!”

“Please have mercy, have mercy!”

Xie Lian thought this whole thing was absolutely absurd—making a mountain out of a molehill—but he could also understand the feelings on both sides. “So did they really steal anything? Did they find that dog?”

Feng Xin shook his head. “Who knows? If the bones were stripped and thrown away, who could prove anything? But judging by their faces, I don’t think they did it.”

But of course the soldiers of the imperial capital would favor the capital’s citizens when handing down their judgment. Whether anything had been stolen or not, there *had* been a riot, and so the fault must lie with those from Yong’an. Furthermore, while the men of the imperial capital loved to strut around, they weren’t as tough as the men of Yong’an; they must’ve been utterly humiliated in that brawl, and that complete loss of face only created a greater feud between the two groups. Xie Lian shook his head.

As his gaze swept over the crowd, he suddenly noticed a familiar-looking young man at the middle of that row of Yong’an prisoners, with his head hung low. It was that man from the woods, Lang Ying.

Xie Lian was stunned. Just then, someone nearby complained.

“It seems like more and more of these Yong’an people have been showing up in the past few months. And now they’ve started to pick fights?”

“They’re not all coming here, are they?”

A man who appeared to be a merchant gestured wildly. “His Majesty the King won’t allow it! My house was robbed by Yong’an thieves just the other day. If they all came here, there’d be hell!”

Lang Ying had kept his head low all this time, letting the groceries hit him freely. But at those words, he suddenly looked up.

“Did you see it?”

The merchant hadn’t expected a response and replied without thinking, “What?”

“Yong’an thieves robbing your house. Did you see them with your own eyes?”

"I-I didn't see them myself, but it's always been peaceful here before—I was only robbed after you all showed up! So how can you say it has nothing to do with you?!" the merchant argued.

Lang Ying nodded. "I get it. Before we came here, your people were the ones stealing, but once we arrived, we became the thieves…"

A rotten persimmon came flying at him before he could finish and smashed into the side of his mouth, looking like he'd vomited a splatter of blood. The merchant burst out laughing, and Lang Ying's eyes dimmed. He closed his mouth and stopped talking.

Xie Lian dissolved the sharp rocks that were thrown at the young men, ensuring that they wouldn't be severely injured. This public humiliation continued until evening, and only after the onlooking citizens finally dispersed did the soldiers decide it was enough. Only then did they unlock the cangues and warn the men not to cause any more trouble, otherwise they'd be severely punished, and so on, and so on. The elders bowed deeply over and over with apologetic smiles, promising to never violate the rules ever again—but Lang Ying, looking apathetic, walked away all alone. Xie Lian watched that lone figure depart, then caught the right moment to appear in a flash from behind a tree and block his path.

The moment he appeared, the young man's eyes sharpened, and in that instant it looked like he was going to choke Xie Lian dead. He took a second to process who was standing before him and withdrew the hand that was so ready to attack.

"It's you."

Xie Lian had transformed back into the form of that young cultivator. Lang Ying had almost managed to seize him, which startled Xie Lian even as he thought, *This man is a little impressive.*

"I gave you that pearl," he said, "so why didn't you take it back to Yong'an?"

Lang Ying regarded him. "My son is here. I'm here too." After a brief pause, he took the coral pearl from his belt. "Do you want it back? Here."

The hand he held out still had marks from the cangue. After a moment of silence, Xie Lian didn't take it.

“Go back. It rained at the Bay of Lang-Er today.” He pointed to the sky. “Tomorrow! There will be rain again, I promise. It’s certain to be so.”

But Lang Ying shook his head. “It doesn’t matter if it rains or not. There’s no going back.”

Watching his back as he walked away, Xie Lian was left dumbfounded. He only felt endless frustration.

Before he ascended, it was like he hadn’t a cloud of worry in his skies. He could do whatever he wanted. Who could’ve known that after ascension, he would suddenly be surrounded by incessant worries—both the worries of others and his own? Had it always been this hard to get something done? He had never felt so lacking, so powerless. Xie Lian sighed and turned to leave as well. There was a mountain of prayers waiting to be addressed by him at the Temple of the Crown Prince.

Yet he wasn’t the most troubled of all. That title went to the king, for the worries of the King of Xianle had become reality—those five-hundred-some Yong’an refugees were only the beginning.

With the borrowed Rain Master’s Hat in hand, Xie Lian ran unceasingly back and forth between the north and the south, creating rain by his own power. Yet every little rainstorm used up an immense amount of spiritual power and five to six days’ worth of his time. There may not have been another god besides him who could keep up such a draining duty—besides Jun Wu, of course. However, the Heavenly Emperor ruled over a far vaster land than he, and the number of devotees and domains he attended to was significantly greater than Xianle. How could Xie Lian possibly distract Jun Wu by asking for his help? And still, each rainstorm could only wet a small area of Yong’an and lasted but a short while. Even if they caused some relief, they couldn’t fix the root of the problem.

After a month of this, the people of Yong’an began their exodus to the east in droves. Before, it was groups of dozens at a time. Now, it was hundreds, thousands, massive hordes that flocked together, streaming like a river.

After another month, the King of Xianle issued a new decree.

“Due to the endless disputes and incessant scuffles of recent months, for the sake of peace within the imperial capital, all Yong’an refugees are to leave the city immediately. Every refugee shall be given a set travel fund to assist in their settlement elsewhere.”

And with that, the grand gates to the imperial capital of Xianle closed before the massive, teeming horde of Yong’an refugees.

“Open the gates!”

“Let us in!”

The soldiers retreated into the city and pushed the thousand-ton gates shut. The people who had been driven out by the soldiers went rushing back toward the entrance like a tide of black water to pound on the massive doors. Atop the towers, the soldiers roared.

“Get away! Leave! Collect your travel fund and head east—don’t mill around!”

But the Yong’an refugees had turned their backs on their homes, fled their lands, and arrived at the closest city—the imperial capital. With the gates to the city now closed to them, if they wanted to survive, they would have to walk an even longer distance around its perimeter to cities further east.

The journey to the imperial capital had already been massively perilous, with countless injured or dead. How could they possibly have any more energy to continue on? Even with the travel funds, rations, and water, how many more days could they endure on the road?

Their faces were ashen. Some dragged their household’s goods behind them, some carried babies on their backs, some carried stretchers. Some held each other up, some could stand no more and lay or sat on the ground. Acres and acres of them stayed there, outside the city walls. Some younger men still had the energy to be enraged, and they pounded the doors with their fists as they yelled.

“You can’t do this! You’ve written off our lives!”

“We’re all citizens of Xianle! You can’t just kill us off like this!”

One of the men yelled until his voice was hoarse. “You can kick us out, that’s fine, I won’t stay, but at least take my wife and children! Please?!”

They were like ants trying to shake a tree; the city gates remained unmoved.

Xie Lian stood on top of the tower, white robes flapping in the wind, and he crossed the parapet to look down below. Outside the imperial capital were endless heads, black and squirming, dense and tightly knit, very much like the swarms of ants he used to see in the imperial gardens when he played there in his younger years. Back then he'd peered at them curiously and surreptitiously extended a finger to poke at them, but immediately an attendant had cried out, *"Your Highness! Those things are dirty, you can't touch! Don't touch!"*

Then she rushed over, skirt lifted, and squashed all the ants under her foot.

When those ants were alive, there was hardly anything worth looking at in their dense, roiling swarm. Once they were squashed into mush, there was even less to look at.

Within the capital walls, lights twinkled magnificently in myriads of homes, and the sound of music wafted in the air. This one city wall separated two completely different worlds.

It wasn't just that new Yong'an refugees were being refused, but even the ones that were already settled in the city had been expelled. It was harsh, but with the mounting friction between the Yong'an refugees and the capital residents in recent months, Xie Lian could somewhat understand. If they allowed any Yong'an citizen to remain inside the city walls, they could collude with those outside the walls and cause havoc.

However, there was one area he felt should be up for negotiation. He said absently, "Why must the women and the vulnerable be expelled too? There are some who can't walk much further."

Feng Xin and Mu Qing stood right behind him.

"If they must be expelled, they must *all* be expelled," Mu Qing replied. "Everyone must be treated equally; there mustn't be any favoritism, lest people be provoked into asking, 'Why can *they* stay when I can't?'"

"You think too much," Feng Xin commented.

“There are absolutely people who would think like that,” Mu Qing said flatly. “Besides, if the wives and children remain, then the men won’t want to go far. They’ll return sooner or later. To keep people in the city is to keep future problems.”

The Yong’an refugees refused to leave, so the soldiers on the towers couldn’t leave either.

“Hmph! Suit yourselves!”

The king himself gave the command, so did they think just sitting there loitering would do anything? They might be able to hang around for a day or two, but not a month or two, or a year or two, or so the soldiers and residents of the imperial capital believed.

Some Yong’an refugees hopelessly accepted their fate and decided to gamble on traveling further eastward, but their numbers were few. Most still sat stubbornly by the city gates, hoping the imperial capital would open its doors to them, or at the very least give them somewhere to rest before they journeyed onwards. Newly arrived refugees were disappointed to see the city gates firmly shut, but when they saw so many waiting there, they joined the masses.

Several days later, the crowd gathered outside the city gates was still only growing. Tens of thousands of people had evidently decided to settle there, and they built impressive rows of temporary shelters. They had the rations and water given by the king to sustain themselves, but the people were almost at their limit.

That limit was breached on the fifth day.

Over that time, Xie Lian had divided each day into three: one third dedicated to the devotees at the Temple of the Crown Prince, one third for moving water and creating rain, and one third for caring for the Yong’an citizens outside the city walls. But even with Feng Xin and Mu Qing helping, Xie Lian still felt the burden of these responsibilities. The spirit was willing, but the flesh was weak.

By coincidence, it happened during a time when Xie Lian wasn’t standing guard outside the city walls. Under the scorching sun, a shriek was suddenly heard outside the gates.

The cry came from a couple cradling their child in their arms. Many went over to see.

“What’s wrong with the child?”

“Hungry, thirsty…?”

And soon, a shout, “Everyone come share some water here! This kid’s not looking good!”

The woman sobbed as she gave water to her red-faced child, but the child just vomited it back up.

“I don’t know what’s wrong,” the father said. “He’s sick. A doctor! We need a doctor!”

Carrying his son, he ran to the gates and started slapping on the doors. “Open up! Help! Someone’s dying! My son is dying!”

It was only natural that the soldiers inside didn’t dare to open the gates. Whether or not someone was actually dying, there were tens of thousands outside—if they opened those gates up, there’d be no closing them. Instead, they reported to the officers higher up. The weather had been hot over the past few days, and the heat was making the soldiers standing watch cranky.

“Give him some food and water,” the officer said dismissively.

They hung food and water on a rope and lowered it down.

“Thank you, thank you, My Lords and brothers, but we don’t want food and water. Can you help us find a doctor?” the man pleaded.

This made things difficult. They couldn’t let him in to find a doctor, and they certainly couldn’t lower a doctor from the city walls—heavens knew what those starving refugees might do once the doctor got outside.

“Forget it,” the high-ranking officers replied. “Ignore them, they’re not dying. If they ask again, tell them their message has been sent to the king for a response.”

Over recent weeks, the king had been deeply troubled by the Yong’an issue and was easily angered, so of course no one would actually dare to bother him with such a trivial matter. The soldiers responded as directed, and that Yong’an man, feeling greatly relieved, thanked them profusely, thanked His Majesty, and knelt to kowtow multiple times. Yet hours upon hours passed, shadows from the scorching sun moved from one end of the earth to the other, and the requested doctor still hadn’t appeared as the child in their arms got hotter and hotter.

The couple cradled their child in arms that trembled nonstop. The man was covered in cold sweat, mumbling, “Is anyone coming? Is anyone opening the gates for me?”

At last they couldn’t wait any longer, and he yelled to the towers, “Officers! My apologies, but I need to ask…where’s the doctor?”

A soldier responded, “We’re waiting for a formal response from the king. Just wait a while longer.”

Some citizens below couldn’t sit still anymore. “They said that four hours ago! Why isn’t there a response yet?!”

The soldiers heeded their superiors’ command and ignored them after that. The crowd surrounding the walls was furious, forlorn, and distressed. They surrounded the child and began to speculate.

“Did they actually pass on the message to His Majesty? They’re not lying to us, are they?”

The father of that child couldn’t wait any longer. He steeled himself, tied the child to his back, and turned to his wife to say a few last words. The woman removed a protection charm from around her neck and put it around her husband’s. Then, the man ran toward the city wall to try to scale it.

The city wall was smooth, built to make climbing difficult; he grabbed at it a few times but didn’t make any progress. The rest of the men called out “Let us help!” and pushed him up. A crowd of over a dozen men stacked themselves into a human pyramid and helped bring him higher. From the top, the man managed to grab onto the rope that had been used to lower water and food and used it to continue his climb. At the bottom, tens of thousands watched anxiously, not daring to cheer for him, scared they might be discovered.

The soldiers on top of the towers had been there for many days and the Yong’an refugees hadn’t started anything, so they were fairly lax in their watch. It wasn’t until the man had reached the halfway point that they noticed that someone was scaling the wall.

“What are you doing?!” they barked. “No climbing! Climbers will be killed without mercy! Do you hear me?! Climbers will be killed without mercy!”

Faced with such a threat, the man shouted back, “I don’t have any ill intentions! I just want to bring my child to the doctor—I won’t do anything else!”

He kept climbing as he called out.

One of the superior officers was just having his meal, and upon hearing of this he became vexed to the extreme. If that man were to scale the wall safely, wouldn’t countless more Yong’an refugees follow his example and attempt the same? He had to be stopped!

Thus, he strode out and shouted down the parapet, “Do you not value your life?! Go back down this instant! If you don’t, you’ll be sorry!”

But the man had already climbed high, past halfway, and with just one more push he’d reach the top—naturally, he wouldn’t stop now. Never in his life had that superior officer been disobeyed like this; his word was law. Those who disobeyed him were easy enough to take care of, however. He approached the parapet, pulled his sword, and struck. The rope snapped in two.

The man plunged downward, snapped rope in hand. Awash in the screams of thousands, he crashed heavily on the hard ground before the city gates.

That was the moment Xie Lian arrived.

The man had fallen on his back, and on his back was his child. *Whomp*, and the child was crushed into ground meat, splattering blood for dozens of meters. The man’s neck was broken, his eyes bulging out of his skull. Around his twisted neck there dangled a charm with the words “Xianle” embroidered in golden thread—a protection charm from the Temple of the Crown Prince.

Right before he had started to climb, the man and his wife both clutched that protection charm in their hands and silently prayed for the blessings of His Highness the Crown Prince; Xie Lian had heard their voices and rushed over. But he was not a hero from the legends written in books. He couldn’t appear right before the executioner dropped the axe every single time, to save lives menaced by the blade.

The woman didn’t even have the courage to flip her husband’s dead body to check on the condition of her son. She covered her face and screamed, and without looking, she made a crazed dash forward to bash her head into the wall. *Crack*, and she dropped on the spot, her body limp.

Right before Xie Lian’s eyes, in the flash of a second, three dead bodies were sprawled before the city gates of the royal capital!

He hadn’t even had the time to react before the crowd outside the city gates was whipped into a frenzy, unable to hold back any longer.

“Dead! A family of three, all dead!” someone yelled. “Look, that’s the good ol’ officer working for His Majesty! He won’t save us, but he sure will kill us!”

“You won’t let us in, but you won’t let anyone out either! So what were we supposed to do?! Three bloody lives are on your hands!”

“You said to expel all Yong’an refugees from the imperial capital, but how come I don’t see any of the rich ones out here? So it’s only the poor and powerless that deserve to die? I can see through you!”

“I can’t stand it anymore…I just can’t. Year after year we paid our taxes, but now that there’s a disaster, where did all that money go?!”

“Did all the money go to parasites and building more temples for your son, instead of aid for disaster victims?! Just a meager bit of food to shut us up—what do you take us for?! Useless king! Incompetent king!”

The soldiers on the towers yelled down at the crowd for them to stop, but the superior officer had seen much in his lifetime and didn’t take any of this seriously. Yet the situation was spiraling out of control. Thousands and tens of thousands pushed furiously against the gates, some even using their own heads and bodies as battering rams, and this time, it wasn’t mere ants on trees.

The gates moved—in fact, the entire city wall and its towers shook faintly!

Xie Lian had never witnessed anything like this in his life. All the people he’d ever met had been kind, peaceful, happy, satisfied, and endearing. Those twisted faces, crying and screaming, forced him to enter a completely foreign world, and he couldn't help but feel chilled to his very bones. Even against the most horrifying ghosts and demons, he had never felt this way.

Just then, there was an angry roar from above.

He whipped his head around and saw a tall, gaunt figure choking the officer who had cut the rope and caused the three deaths outside the city walls. With a loud, clear *crack*, the officer's neck was snapped.

The other soldiers had no idea how that man had suddenly appeared. Pale with shock, they rushed forward to surround him, brandishing their swords.

"Who are you?!"

"How did you get up here?!"

Xie Lian immediately noticed the man's hands—the flesh was ripped to bits and smeared with blood. This man had scaled that smooth wall with only his bare hands!

When the figure turned around, he saw that it was Lang Ying!

Lang Ying was calm and collected even when surrounded by soldiers. He crossed the parapet and threw the corpse of the officer down. Then he jumped off, using the corpse as a stepping-stone to break his fall.

The moment he jumped, he looked straight at Xie Lian. But the man wasn't truly looking at Xie Lian. Instead, he looked right through him to gaze at the imperial palace that towered at the center of the capital.

From that day onward, all of the Kingdom of Xianle was thrown into chaos.

Chapter 34:
Xianle in Chaos, Crown Prince Returns to the Mortal Realm

FOR DISPLACED DISASTER VICTIMS like those from Yong'an, to pick a fight against the imperial army was a losing battle, a gross overestimation of their own strength.

Yet cornered people often possessed the courage to court ruin and fight a losing battle. After that riot, the tens of thousands of Yong'an refugees finally left the city gates and rebuilt their temporary camps some distance away.

Still, they stubbornly refused to leave. They could die on the road if they kept going, but if staying was also death, what was the difference? Using the rations and water the king had distributed, supplementing them with bark, wild herbs, plant roots, critters, and insects, and topping it all off with resentment and loathing, those people possessed an unimaginably persistent will to live and relentlessly persevered. After a few days, they managed to assemble a few thousand men and returned for a fight wielding hoes, rakes, rocks, and branches.

Although their clash was a mess, an utter defeat, with over half of those few thousand dead, it wasn't fruitless. Lang Ying made it into a tower and returned hauling several large bags of grain and bundles of real weapons. There may have been serious casualties, but that just created a will to fight to the death among the people.

Their nature was closer to that of bandits now. They raided once, twice, thrice. The soldiers of Xianle soon discovered that the tactics of those "bandits" were rapidly improving.

The initially inexperienced rioters gradually got the hang of things, and every time they attacked they were more difficult to deal with than the last—the number who returned to camp alive increased with every attempt. There were also endless waves of new refugees joining the cause after hearing the news, and the group grew significantly in size. How to best deal with those "bandits" became the hottest topic for debate within the Kingdom of Xianle, and after five or six such ridiculous guerilla attacks, Xie Lian could no longer sit still on the parapet and simply watch from the sidelines.

He hadn’t reported to the heavens in a long time, but this time, when he arrived at the Heavenly Capital, he dashed straight to the Palace of Divine Might without a word. When he barged in, Jun Wu was seated on his throne. A group of heavenly officials seemed to be discussing an important matter and were bowing to receive his command. In the past, Xie Lian would’ve chosen a different day to pay this visit, but at the moment he had no time to spare. He cut right in.

“My Lord, I’m returning to the Mortal Realm.”

The heavenly officials were startled. They immediately covered their mouths, keeping silent, not wanting to show any kind of reaction. Jun Wu looked at him knowingly for a moment, then rose from his throne to speak to him gently.

“Xianle, I have an idea of what is happening, but you must remain calm.”

“My Lord, I didn’t come here to request permission. I came here to inform you,” Xie Lian said. “My people are currently mired in the depths of hell, so please forgive me if I cannot remain calm.”

“The world has its own destiny,” Jun Wu said. “Do you not realize that if you descend and appear before mortals, it will be a violation of heavenly law?”

“If it’s a violation, then so be it!” Xie Lian cried.

At this, the faces of the heavenly officials changed color. Never had a heavenly official dared to speak such words with so much gusto and so unapologetically. No matter how highly Jun Wu regarded this young, early ascended Prince of Xianle, it was still an act of great audacity.

A moment later, Xie Lian bowed. “Pray My Lord let me go this once—just give me a little time. Since fighting has started, casualties are unavoidable. But if I can stop this and reduce the number of dead, minimize the conflict, then after the war ends I will return willingly to repent, and My Lord can sentence me as he sees fit. Whether I should be sealed under a mountain for a hundred years, a thousand years, a hundred thousand years—I will not regret it!”

After having his say, he remained in that bowing posture and stood down, leaving the great hall.

“Xianle!” Jun Wu called.

Xie Lian paused in his step. Jun Wu gazed at him, then sighed.

“You cannot save everyone.”

Xie Lian slowly straightened up. “I won’t know until I’ve tried. Even if the heavens say I must die, if that sword doesn’t pierce my heart and nail me dead to the ground, then I am still alive, and I will struggle till my last breath!”

Returning to the Mortal Realm in solid form was unlike all the previous times he’d descended. Xie Lian felt like something had been abandoned. He felt light, and at the same time, heavy.

His first action was to return to the palace at once. The king and the queen were in the imperial study whispering to each other, their faces grave and exhausted. Xie Lian approached the door nervously at first, but then he calmed himself, raised the curtain, and walked in.

“Father.”

The king and the queen both looked back at the same time in shock. It was the queen who stood up first, crying joyously.

“My son!”

She extended both her hands and came forward to welcome him. Xie Lian caught her arms, accepting the gesture. But before the smiles went away, he saw the king’s expression growing darker.

“Why have you descended?” the king demanded.

Xie Lian’s smile froze.

Before, when he heard his parents talk about him behind his back, Xie Lian had thought that his father might miss him and wasn’t as biased against him as it always seemed. He had thought that the king would show at least some degree of pleasure in seeing his return and that he would surely soften his attitude. How could he expect that the king would react this way, so full of scorn? Xie Lian’s own temper flared.

"Why have I descended? Isn't it all because of you?!" he replied sharply. "Shouldn't you ask yourself whether you bear responsibility for the situation with Yong'an coming to this?"

The king's face completely changed, and he countered harshly, "My responsibility? Is that something you can say to me?!"

His fury made him forget his royal plurals, and the queen teared up.

"The situation is already as bad as can be, so why are you two arguing?"

"We're not arguing," Xie Lian said. "We're talking about basic logic. Even if you are the king and my father, if you are the one responsible, why can't I say anything? Why didn't you work harder on disaster relief? If the aid money was completely swallowed by government checkpoints, why didn't you punish the corrupt officials? If you were fierce like thunder and fast like lightning, jailing them all with no exceptions, then would there still be so many parasites who'd dare to steal? Wouldn't things be better than they are now?"

Veins popped on the king's forehead, and he banged on his bureau desk. "Quiet! Do you think the royal treasury is a bottomless well that can fix any leaking hole?! Jail them all—if it were that easy, if by just one order from this king it'd work fast like lightning, fierce as thunder, then why has history never seen a dynasty untouched by corruption? What *logic* do you know?! You ignorant child, you dare speak politics with me?!"

"Fine," Xie Lian acquiesced. "I don't understand. But even if the imperial capital had no room for the victims to settle and their expulsion was inevitable, why not provide more for them? Why not appease them properly and have an army escort them on their journey eastward?"

The king's eyes bulged with rage, and he pointed to the sky. "*Begone!* Get out of here! Get back to the heavens; just looking at you annoys me! Don't ever appear here again!"

Xie Lian had descended with a heart full of fervor, yet the reunion with his parents ended with his father yelling and sending him back to the heavens. Without a word, Xie Lian gave a curt bow and stood down to leave the imperial study.

The queen chased after him as he left and pulled him to a stop.

“My son!”

“Mother, don’t worry,” Xie Lian said gently. “I’m just going to walk around the imperial capital to check on the situation.”

The queen shook her head. “My son, I don’t understand these political matters, but I understand your father. Throughout the years, I’ve seen how he is as a king. You can think from the bottom of your heart that he isn’t competent, and sometimes I think the same, even if I don’t say it out loud. But you can’t say that to his face. He’s your father, after all. It’s devastating to hear you say that he’s been neglectful.”

Xie Lian opened and closed his mouth.

The queen added, “You might have been the crown prince, but you have never been King. Ruling a nation is different from cultivating. When you first entered the Royal Holy Temple, the state preceptor said cultivation only concerns the heart, isn’t that right?”

Xie Lian nodded slowly, and the queen clutched his hands.

“But there are many times in this world when just having heart isn’t enough. You must be capable too; and not just you but your subordinates as well. They must match you in ability and also share your heart.”

Xie Lian remained silent. After a moment, he asked, “Is the royal treasury suffering? I don’t need temples; tell him to stop building so many for me. Those golden statues can go.”

“My child…” the queen replied helplessly, “of course your father’s bias is showing a little in building temples. He wanted to give you the best and to make you look impressive in the heavens. But do you know just how many of those eight thousand temples were actually built by your father? You don’t know, do you?”

Xie Lian really didn’t know, and he pondered briefly. “Half…?”

“If your father really used funds from the royal treasury to build four thousand temples, we wouldn’t need to wait for the Yong’an refugees to start anything—the imperial capital would revolt first,” the queen said. “So if the royal treasury is empty, where do you think all that money came from? Your father built maybe twenty temples, and others followed suit;

masses of them wanting to build to curry his favor, to curry your favor. Is that counted among your father's failures too?"

"I…" Xie Lian was stumped.

The queen said softly, "Your father isn't the greatest king, but…he's done his best. Only, in this world, simply doing your best isn't good enough."

After a pause, she added, "Right now, you feel sympathy for those Yong'an refugees, so you blame your father. But they're all his people; do you think we're the ones bullying them? In truth…"

Halfway through her words, the enraged voice of the king echoed from the study.

"What are you doing, telling him so many useless things?! Make him leave and go back to the heavens!"

The queen turned back to him and sighed. "My son, don't…don't descend for this. Go back."

After leaving the palace, Xie Lian wandered down an alleyway near the Grand Avenue of Divine Might. As he walked, Feng Xin and Mu Qing appeared in a rush.

The moment Mu Qing approached, he asked in disbelief, "Your Highness! You requested to descend to the Mortal Realm? You spoke to the Heavenly Emperor?!"

"Yes," Xie Lian answered.

"Why didn't you tell me first?" Mu Qing demanded.

"What do you mean?" Feng Xin asked, puzzled. "When he wants to do something, does His Highness have to report to anyone?"

Mu Qing seemed to be losing it. "Why shouldn't he? We're his subordinates, and right now we're all tied together. His every action affects us! So is there something wrong with me wanting to know his plans?"

"We'd have to follow His Highness no matter what he does! Heaven or earth, he goes his own way. So what are you afraid of?" Feng Xin said.

"You—!" Mu Qing cut himself off in frustration. "I'm not afraid! I'm only…"

Xie Lian waved. “Enough. Stop arguing!”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing quieted immediately. Just then, a crowd of demonstrators paraded down the main street in a long line; thousands of citizens hollering.

“There will be no peace in the kingdom until Yong’an is exterminated!”

“They’ve gone too far! They’ve created too much disorder! They’re a *cancer*!”

The people of Xianle had never been so aggressive about anything, nor had they ever engaged in such a roaring protest. Xie Lian couldn’t help but think something was amiss. Feng Xin, on the other hand, frowned.

“How come there’s a woman in there?”

Sure enough, at the forefront of that crowd marched a young woman. She was slender, her skin snow white, her eyes bright and black, her cheeks flushed not from shyness but from rage—an eye-catching sight.

By then, Mu Qing had calmed himself down. “His Highness doesn’t recognize her?” he asked coldly.

“No,” Xie Lian replied.

Feng Xin knitted his brows. “She looks a bit familiar.”

“She’s one of the catalysts,” Mu Qing said.

“What catalysts?” Xie Lian asked.

“The catalysts for this standoff,” Mu Qing replied. “Before, when there were more and more Yong’an refugees surging into the capital, some wouldn’t quietly mind their own business and went around causing trouble. The court was discussing the matter of expulsion, and word of it was spreading. There was a Yong’an refugee who wanted to avoid being expelled, so he decided to take a risk. One night, he snuck into the house of a wealthy family and kidnapped their daughter.”

Xie Lian couldn’t wrap his head around this. “Why would he kidnap a rich family’s daughter if he didn’t want to leave?”

Mu Qing gave him a look. “To marry her. The only way a daughter from a good family in the imperial capital would marry a man of Yong’an would be…by force.”

He didn’t say it plainly, but Xie Lian understood. He had never thought that there were actually people out there who would do such a thing—that something like that could happen. A sudden wave of nausea rolled up from his chest.

“Disgusting!” Feng Xin cursed angrily on the spot.

Just then, a group of aunties rushed over, grabbing and pulling at the young woman. By the looks of it, she had snuck out when her family wasn’t paying attention.

That young woman wouldn’t yield, yelling, “I’m not afraid! I have nothing to be ashamed of! I wasn’t in the wrong!”

“That chick’s pretty spunky,” Feng Xin said, amazed.

“Yes,” Mu Qing replied. “She didn’t come from an ordinary background. Her father is a high-ranking official, and her mother hails from a family of wealthy merchants in the capital. They refused to suffer this quietly, and definitely wouldn’t marry off their daughter for shame’s sake, so they beat that Yong’an man to death. Soon after, all the wealthy merchants and gentlemen of renown in the capital signed a petition that listed every crime the Yong’an refugees had committed since entering the city and demanded the king jail all of them and have them severely punished. There’s no need to explain where the government officials stand on this.”

He paused briefly, then said with a casual air, “I hear that the girl’s father once wanted her to enter the harem and fight for the position of the prince’s consort. Your Highness must’ve seen her face a few times long ago. I’m surprised you don’t recognize her.”

Xie Lian finally realized that everything was much more complicated than he had imagined.

There were two sides to this tumultuous standoff, deeply entrenched, within and without. The people were furious, and each side desperately wanted to kill the other. If the king’s decree was partial to Yong’an, wasn’t that a slap in the face to his own people? When at last he decided to distribute some aid from the royal treasury to the Yong’an refugees, it probably displeased many of the city’s residents.

Even more frightening than a displeased enemy was the dissatisfaction of a kingdom’s own people. While technically everyone was of Xianle, there were probably very few who believed that now.

For so long, Xie Lian had been standing on high, unaware of all the problems of the Mortal Realm. However, his father was still in it. As a king, he needed money, he needed people, and in his position, the stress, the pressure, and the compromises he needed to make to solve the problems of his citizens were incomparable to the troubles Xie Lian knew. When the Yong’an refugees arrived, they took over land, made a racket, stole things, and so on. To a martial god sitting in a temple, these were all small matters that did not call for such fury; simply endure it, and it will pass. However, to the residents of the capital, these were all very real, unmanageable, intolerable tortures—a crisis waiting to erupt. It was only because he wasn’t in the thick of it that he could consider these matters simple or trivial.

Xie Lian couldn’t help but recall that the king’s hair had gone even whiter than the last time he had seen him. Last time, the king had said he was going to dye it, but he probably didn’t have the energy to care anymore.

When Xie Lian was younger, he firmly believed that his father was the world’s greatest king. But the older he got, the more he realized that wasn’t the case. Although his father was king, he couldn’t be called a wise or competent one; he was even a little corrupt and made mistakes often. Without his prestigious status, he was nothing more than a common mortal man.

The more Xie Lian realized this, the more disappointed he became. The king noticed his disappointment and could not accept every disagreeing look, every disagreeing word from Xie Lian. What he couldn’t accept above all, however, was having Xie Lian see his failures.

No father in the world wanted his son to see his failures. Every father wanted his son to see him as the greatest. Yet Xie Lian had appeared before him at a terrible time just to berate him: *“You’re making such a mess of things that I had to descend to help you out!”* As both a king and a father, how could he withstand hearing that?

The young woman was finally hustled away by her servants, and the hundreds of other demonstrating residents continued their protest, waving signs and hollering. They were crying for only one thing.

"Kill them! Open fire! Show those Yong'an refugees crawling around outside the walls!"

A moment later, Mu Qing spoke up.

"Your Highness, at this point it'd be best to go back and apologize to the Heavenly Emperor. Favorable time and place and conditions, it's all lost. There's no helping this."

It was just as Jun Wu had told him at the Palace of Divine Might—*"The world has its own destiny."* But that was no different from telling him that the Kingdom of Xianle's time had come to an end and to let it go.

Even the queen, his mother, who wished day and night to be granted only a glimpse of him, asked him to leave with tears in her eyes when she finally saw him. How could Xie Lian not understand that they simply didn't want him to go through this difficult trial, that they'd rather he just take care of himself and watch from afar?

But how could he?

After a long silence, Xie Lian gravely declared, "No!"

And he strode out.

Chapter 35:
Quell Yong’an, Crown Prince Enters the Battlefield

BEHIND HIM, both Feng Xin and Mu Qing were in shock. “Your Highness!” they cried and immediately rushed out to stand guard next to him.

However, the citizens on the Grand Avenue of Divine Might had already seen the young man in white who appeared right at the center of the main street. The protesters were broken up but soon rallied, and a crowd of thousands soon surrounded Xie Lian.

The first person spoke, unsure. “My Lord… My Lord is His Highness the Crown Prince?”

The second one was doubtful. “Didn’t His Highness the Crown Prince ascend? He’s no longer mortal, so why would he appear to us here?”

The third one yelled, “It’s him! Three years ago at the Heavenly Ceremonial Procession I saw him with my own eyes; it’s His Highness the Crown Prince!”

More and more people began to recognize the face of that martial god they worshipped day and night, and Xie Lian answered them slowly.

“It is I. I have returned.”

The people went wild.

“A god descended! A god really descended!”

“A divine being has returned to the Mortal Realm!”

“Your Highness must have returned because you could no longer tolerate seeing us suffer the abuse of those thieves!”

Many pressed on, full of hope. “Your Highness, will My Lord lead us to drive out those Yong’an interlopers? It’s for certain, right? It must be so!”

After a pause, Xie Lian answered calmly, “I have returned to protect the Kingdom of Xianle, to protect my people.”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing listened to him intently as they stood by his side, but they couldn't be sure what exactly those words meant—yet the citizens whose minds were addled by hot blood interpreted them as they wished. As for Xie Lian, he had his own concerns. His heart was racing faster and faster, and he gritted his teeth.

"Believe in me…!"

He clenched his fists and cried, "Your belief will grant me greater power. With this power I promise I will shield Xianle with my life and protect the common people. Please believe in me!"

The people had been waiting for this very moment; all they wanted was that pledge. They erupted in fervent cheers and kneeled to prostrate themselves in circles that fanned outward.

"We will follow My Lord to the ends of the earth! We'll follow Your Highness!"

"Protect Xianle!"

When the residents of the imperial capital heard that a god had descended upon them, they all poured out into the streets, if only to witness the sort of miracle that wouldn't appear even once in a thousand years. Even the capital guards, who had hurried over to address the chaos, didn't dare to be impudent—they joined the prostrating crowd. The three of them were stuck in the middle of the main street, unable to move, and Feng Xin and Mu Qing tried to maintain order, shouting as they did so.

"Don't push! Stop pushing!"

However, they weren't very effective. Everyone wanted to jostle closer to His Highness the Crown Prince and touch even just a sleeve corner of this divine god from heaven, so some of his holiness would rub off on them. Finally, the king was alerted, and it took several generals leading fully armored soldiers to break up the fervent crowd.

When everyone was gone, all that was left behind was dust-filled air and messy footprints littering the ground. Xie Lian noticed something, and he bent down to pick it up.

It was a single flower. After being trampled by so many, it was almost the color of the dirt below. Only a few ripped petals remained, with just a little of their original purity peeking through.

That faint fragrance didn’t last; it soon dispersed.[4]

Now that he understood things a bit better, when Xie Lian returned to the palace, his temper was much softer toward the king. In turn, the king was also far more agreeable toward him. Since they both took a step back, father and son established a tentative peace between them.

As for the state preceptor, it seemed he already expected Xie Lian to descend, so he didn’t comment much on the subject.

In the past, Xie Lian had always believed that a nation shared one heart, and that in the face of a serious issue, everyone would undoubtedly follow the direction of the king. That was only natural. However, when he actually sat down to participate, he finally learned just how vexing the position of a king really was. At court, the officials were split into small factions, and each faction had its own plans. To come to an agreement on any one matter could take up to seven days of endless debate. Every official and every faction proclaimed that they were working for the people, but one couldn’t help but suspect that might not be entirely true.

The officials were painfully slow at finding a consensus on how to deal with the Yong’an refugees camping outside the city, who had now officially rebelled. Some advocated for direct extermination—and if there wasn’t good enough reason to do such a thing, they could simply fabricate excuses. But some disagreed with that plan.

The Revolt of Yong’an began with a natural disaster, but the situation deteriorated through human action. That family of three who fell to their deaths at the city gates was the worst catalyst imaginable. The officer who cut the rope would’ve been severely punished upon his return to the palace if his neck hadn’t been snapped by Lang Ying. To put it bluntly—no matter how convoluted the circumstances, no matter the reasons, on the surface it seemed like a straightforward case of the common people rightfully rebelling against an oppressive authority.

Now that things had devolved to the present point of complete pandemonium, fabricating more crimes to punish would only provoke further disgust and whatever reasons they used to justify them would not work to deceive the people. But if they simply deployed an army to exterminate the refugees, it’d be without a just cause and would destroy any illusion of benevolent authority. Preventing gossip was just as important as preventing floods; once a reputation for insensible cruelty was established, not only would the government lose the trust of its people, nearby kingdoms could seize the opportunity to invade under the pretense of eradicating a great evil.

However, thinking about it from a different angle, what was there to be afraid of? The Yong’an refugees were squatting in the wilderness with neither food nor arms, so how long could the revolt last? Thus, the most popular proposal in the end was this: If the Yong’an refugees dare attack, they shall be repelled and killed each time. If they don’t, then they shall be left to their own devices to survive or die. Xianle wouldn’t need to waste a single resource, and the people of Yong’an would be left to exhaust themselves.

As a martial god, Xie Lian’s descent naturally meant he had to demonstrate his worth on the battlefield, so it stood to reason that the army vigorously played up their cause: The side of His Highness the Crown Prince was the side of justice! The army of His Highness the Crown Prince was the army of god!

All of a sudden, countless young men across the entire kingdom excitedly enlisted, and in a few short days, the size of the Xianle army exploded exponentially. It caused such a stir that news of it must have reached the Yong’an camp. They had been regularly raiding in small groups, but suddenly everything stopped, as if they’d grown wary and were silently building their strength. This made the soldiers in Xianle nervous, and over and over they described to Xie Lian just how terrifying that Lang Ying was—the man who was always on the front lines. The sound of his name and the memory of the infant’s dead body always brought up complicated feelings for Xie Lian.

After two long months of waiting with bated breath, the Yong’an refugees finally launched another attack.

Xie Lian only brought a short sword and didn’t even wear any armor. The battle ended in under two hours.

Blood stained everything, from the earth to the sky to the reeking air itself. The remaining Yong’an warriors abandoned their gear and retreated frantically. Before the Xianle soldiers could react, they were already surrounded by countless slain bodies—there was not a single enemy left standing. As for His Highness the Crown Prince, he was slowly sheathing his sword without so much as a stain on his sleeves.

It was a moment before they could comprehend their own overwhelming victory. They jumped and raised their swords to the sky, screaming themselves hoarse in joy.

That night, the Xianle soldiers held a victory feast atop the towers.

It had been a long time since the soldiers had felt this proud and elated, and the cheers were endless as they raised their cups to praise His Highness the Crown Prince. However, Xie Lian rejected the wine, and he left the party to go to the far corner of the tower by himself, to feel the breeze and sober up.

Even though he didn't drink a single cup of wine, he could still feel his heart burning, his face flushed with heat, and his fingertips trembling slightly.

This was the first time in Xie Lian's life that he had killed. The very first time, and he had killed thousands.

Ants.

The word kept appearing in his mind. Before his might, mortals fell with a single blow; he could destroy them with even a single light squeeze. It was so easy to steal another's life, just as that palace attendant had stomped on the ants. He had almost lost his heart for reverence in between the swings of his sword.

Xie Lian leaned against the parapet and drew in a few deep breaths, shaking his head to shake off the noise, and he stared absentmindedly at the flicker of sparks in the far mountains.

Soon after, the sound of footfalls approached.

Even without turning his head, he knew who it was. "Aren't you two going to go drink and celebrate a little?" Xie Lian asked.

Mu Qing humphed. "What's there to celebrate? The situation doesn't look good."

Hearing that, Xie Lian turned around. "You guys noticed too?"

There really wasn’t anything to be optimistic about. Even though they won this round, the truth was this attack was stronger than any previous Yong’an attacks.

Not only had their numbers increased, their formation, weapons, management—everything had improved significantly. Many of them were even dressed in armor. Although still simple and crude, it was obvious they already had the makings of a formal army. It was hard to believe they were actually outcast nobodies.

Mu Qing crossed his arms and frowned. “Extreme environments certainly force one to improve rapidly, but no matter how difficult the situation, you can’t create resources out of nothing. Something’s not right.”

Feng Xin was even more straightforward and said plainly, “They must have gotten reinforcements.”

Xie Lian nodded.

“I don’t believe that none of our soldiers noticed either,” Mu Qing added. “But they’re still celebrating because they have you on their side. They believe it’s a sure victory.”

Xie Lian didn’t think much of that. “It’s the first battle I was involved in, and we won. It’s fine to let them enjoy it a bit. Just think of it as improving morale.”

Though he hesitated briefly, Feng Xin still asked in the end, “Your Highness, you don’t look so good. Are you still creating rain in Yong’an?”

“Yeah,” Xie Lian replied.

As expected, disapproval appeared on Mu Qing’s face. “Excuse my bluntness, but it’s pointless to create rain now. That’s the real bottomless hole. Your Highness, even if the drought in Yong’an could be entirely relieved, that crowd outside the city walls probably wouldn’t back off.”

“I know,” Xie Lian said. “But my rain isn’t meant to make these people retreat. It’s for those who remained in Yong’an, to make sure they don’t die of thirst. That was my original goal, and I won’t change it for anything.”

Feng Xin was still worried. “Can you really keep this up?”

Xie Lian patted his shoulder. "Don't worry. I have eight thousand temples! There are plenty of devotees, so I'm fine, of course. But…"

His other arm circled around Mu Qing's shoulders, and Xie Lian sighed. "Thank goodness you two helped today. Thank you for staying by my side."

That day on the battlefield, his two subordinates suffered much more than he did. They were absolutely covered in blood and grime from all the killing.

"There's no need to say such things," Feng Xin said, and Mu Qing gave a noncommittal grunt.

Xie Lian squeezed the other two close and said earnestly, "Not just for today but for always—thank you both so much. I hope the sight of the three of us standing tall and fighting together will inspire a story for the ages."

"…"

"…"

A moment later, Feng Xin burst out laughing, while Mu Qing said incredulously, "How do you always say things with…such shameless confidence? You're really…" He shook his head. "Never mind."

Xie Lian's lips finally curled up. But the smile didn't last long, and he suddenly froze.

"Who's there?!"

Sching! Xie Lian's sword was unsheathed. With a light flick of his blade, he plucked a shadow from the corner of the parapet.

The person had been hiding in the corner for a long time, holding his breath, and had surprisingly gone unnoticed until now. Xie Lian had only intended to scare him by hanging him off the tip of his sword, but he had killed too aggressively on the battlefield that day; his arms were still shaking and his hands lost control. His simple flick was too powerful, and he threw the person right over the wall.

Under the moonlight, all three of them were able to see clearly that the person's uniform and gear were that of their own army, and he himself looked like a boy of maybe fourteen or fifteen. The boy hung in midair for a moment, and one breath later, his form disappeared as he plummeted toward the ground below. *Oh no!* Xie Lian cried internally, and he leapt out.

As he dove over the side, he hooked his foot onto the edge of the parapet, and he swiftly reached out and managed to grab the boy's arm. The young soldier's body dangled in midair and swung back and forth a few times before he looked up. Their eyes met, and borrowing the faint moonlight, Xie Lian was able to see his face.

His eyes widened.

Chapter 36:
Upon Beizi Hill, the Crown Prince Falls into the Devil's Nest

XIE LIAN'S SUDDEN LEAP over the edge was certainly alarming, but his two attendants were more than aware of his capabilities. Mu Qing didn't bother to move, though Feng Xin went over and helped pull him up. Xie Lian only used a little strength to pull and the young soldier was hauled up along with him, and the two of them found their feet on the tower once more.

"Who's your captain? Why are you hiding here?" Xie Lian asked.

The young soldier's arms and head were wrapped with bandages, and there were spots of blood seeping through; it appeared he was covered in wounds. This wasn't strange, as there were many wounded soldiers all wrapped up like this after the battle today. However, hiding silently in the shadows was highly suspicious.

"He'd better not be a Yong'an spy—tie him up and interrogate him," Mu Qing advised.

Xie Lian suspected the same, but the imperial capital was rigorously guarded and the chance of enemies sneaking in was low—unless it was Lang Ying. However, this young soldier was clearly only a child, barely of age.

Feng Xin, though, spoke up in amazement. "Your Highness, you don't remember this brat? During the battle today, he kept charging forward, throwing himself ahead of you at the front of the formation."

"Oh, really?" Xie Lian said, slightly taken aback.

In the midst of all the killing that day, he'd had no time to notice anything; he was solely focused on striking back every time someone raised a sword against him. He hadn't even bothered with Feng Xin and Mu Qing, so how could he notice some little soldier?

Feng Xin was sure. "It's him. I remember this brat. His charge was quite aggressive, like he didn't care about his life at all."

Hearing this, Xie Lian scrutinized this young soldier carefully. For some reason the boy stood taller, his shoulders squared and head raised, as if he was a little stiff but also like he was standing at attention.

“Even so, he shouldn’t be sneaking around and hiding here,” Mu Qing remarked. “Who knows if he’s here to spy or eavesdrop?”

Despite his words, he still relaxed his guard. Due to the Xianle military’s campaign promoting their “holy crusade by the army of god,” there were quite a few young people who enlisted just to follow Xie Lian, many just as young as this boy. Most were loyal devotees who grew up worshipping his divine statues and listening to his tales of valor. They all wanted to sneak close, if only to steal a glimpse of the martial god—it wasn’t the first or even the second time something like this had happened, so it wasn’t anything special.

“All right, it was a false alarm,” Xie Lian said. Then he turned to the young soldier and said warmly, “I must’ve scared you just now. Sorry.”

Yet the boy didn’t look frightened and only stood straighter. “Your Highness…”

He trailed off and suddenly lunged at Xie Lian!

Xie Lian thought the boy was trying to ambush him and sidestepped immediately to dodge, his hand raised and ready to chop down. With his might, just one strike would kill the boy on the spot. But just then, he felt a rush of cold air behind him. His hand changed track abruptly; his wrist twisted, and he caught a sniping arrow that had been aimed at his back.

It turned out that boy had tried to tackle him because he had seen the glint of the arrow flying through the air. Xie Lian had been leaning against the wall of the parapet at first, but even after being attacked from behind, he wasn’t scared in the slightest. He jumped onto the wall to look downward.

In the vast fields before the city gates, he could faintly see the lone figure of a man standing in the far distance. Since he wore dark-colored clothing and blended into the night, he was difficult to spot. Feng Xin was instantly at Xie Lian’s side; he drew his bow and shot. However, it seemed that the man had already calculated the distance and stood just out of reach. The one arrow he shot got Xie Lian’s attention, so he waved, then turned swiftly to leave without a word. When Feng Xin’s arrow reached him, it was already too late, and it drove into the ground just inches behind that man’s retreating feet.

Furious, Feng Xin pounded his fist on the wall, sending dust tumbling down. “Who was that?!”

Who else could it be?

“Lang Ying!” Xie Lian shouted.

The Xianle soldiers had also noticed strange things afoot. Though they caused quite a stir, the soldiers retained enough caution to not immediately open the gates to give chase and instead reported to the superiors for instructions.

Lang Ying waved and left after shooting that one arrow—almost as if he had come specifically to greet Xie Lian.

Mu Qing furrowed his brow. “Why did he come here? As a show of strength?”

“Yong’an was completely destroyed on the battlefield today,” Feng Xin spat angrily, “and he himself barely escaped death at His Highness’s hands. What strength could he possibly show?”

Xie Lian, however, felt that the arrow in his hand had something tied around it. When he brought it to the firelight for further examination, he saw it was a ripped piece of cloth that seemed to come from a rich green brocade. There were traces of wet blood still on the fabric, and when he unfolded it, he found a twisted scribble of the word “Qi.”

Xie Lian immediately clutched that fabric and demanded, “Where’s Qi Rong? Is Qi Rong not at the palace?!”

Feng Xin turned to the nearby soldiers. “Go to the palace and confirm, quickly!”

The soldiers left immediately. That cloth was indeed a corner from the sleeve of Qi Rong’s favorite robe, and Lang Ying was known for his stealth, so there was a high probability that Qi Rong had been kidnapped. Xie Lian knew there was no time to waste.

“I’m going after him to find out.” Seeing that Feng Xin had returned, he added, “You two watch over the city gates, but don’t make any moves. This might be a ploy to lure us out of the city.”

Feng Xin shrugged his bow onto his back. “You’re not bringing anyone?”

Xie Lian didn’t want Xianle to deploy soldiers if there wasn’t a major offense from Yong’an’s side. If Qi Rong had fallen into enemy hands, then Xie Lian himself could bring him back; if he brought troops with him, it would be war, and it wouldn’t end with only one or two dead. At the moment, Xie Lian just wanted to minimize losses.

“No. They can’t do anything to me.”

He lightly pushed off the wall and leapt over, landing softly down on the ground, then he dashed off in the direction that Lang Ying had retreated.

After he’d been running for a while, he heard footsteps catching up to him from behind. When he turned his head to look, he saw the young soldier.

“I don’t need help, go back!” Xie Lian shouted at him.

The boy shook his head.

“Go back!” Xie Lian tried again. Then he sped up, leaving the boy far behind. He lost sight of him in an instant.

After running for a dozen kilometers, he reached a mountaintop. This mountain wasn’t steep—it was more like a hill. Thus, it was called Beizi Hill—that is, “Small Back.” According to their scouts, after the people of Yong’an retreated from the city walls, their armed forces and civilians had started sheltering here. Beizi Hill was thick with foliage, and in the deep night, strange noises rustled from all throughout the dark forest, as if there were countless creatures lying low, watching. Xie Lian went further into the mountain and searched with his breath held for a long time. Then, suddenly, he saw a form in the distance—a tall, humanoid shape hanging from a tree.

He looked closely, then cried, “Qi Rong!”

It was indeed Qi Rong. He was hung upside down from a tree, and it looked like he had fainted from the severe beating he’d clearly received. Blood ran downward from his nose, and one of his eyes was blackened. Xie Lian drew his sword and cut the rope, caught the fallen Qi Rong, then slapped him repeatedly in the face. Qi Rong slowly came to and shouted at the sight of him.

“Cousin Crown Prince!”

Xie Lian was just loosening his bindings when he felt coldness at his back, and he immediately swung his sword out behind him. As he turned, he saw that it was Lang Ying brandishing a greatsword and lunging at him.

The two swords clashed, the blades resounding as they traded blows, but it wasn’t long before Xie Lian had knocked Lang Ying’s sword flying. Then Xie Lian kicked his legs, tripping him, and brought his sword to his attacker’s throat to end the fight.

“You know you are not my equal. Stop fighting.”

They’d faced off earlier that day on the battlefield. Everyone who charged at Xie Lian was killed—except Lang Ying, who survived taking Xie Lian’s sword head on and dragged himself away wounded. Anyone could see that Lang Ying was the leader of the Yong’an refugees, so Xie Lian telling him to “stop fighting” naturally implied something much deeper.

“As long as your people do not invade further, I promise that the soldiers of the imperial capital will not attack you. Take the water and the rations. Leave.”

Lang Ying lay on the ground and stared him straight in the eyes with a gaze that made him uncomfortable. “Your Highness, do you think what you’re doing is right?”

Xie Lian stiffened. Next to him, Qi Rong cussed.

“Cut the crap! Don’t you know who my Cousin Crown Prince is? He’s a god of heaven! Do you seriously think he’s wrong and you’re right, you treacherous dogs?!”

“Qi Rong, quiet!” Xie Lian barked.

He couldn’t answer Lang Ying’s question. Deep down, he did feel that there was something wrong with what he’d done. But it was the best plan he could think of. Could he really leave Xianle unprotected against invasion and allow the Yong’an rebels to freely storm the wall again and again—perhaps even eventually breaching the capital itself?

If only one or two swung their swords at him, he could simply knock them out to end things without going too far. But on the battlefield, blades were relentless and merciless—he simply didn’t have the energy to knock everyone out. All he could do was stop himself from feeling and swing his sword. In asking him that question, Lang Ying had woken a voice deep within: *Do you think what you’re doing is right?*

Qi Rong didn’t have this inner dilemma and kept running his mouth. “What did I say wrong? Cousin, since you’re here, hurry and kill all of these damned thieves! A dozen of them ganged up on me when I was alone and beat me up!”

Qi Rong was a figure of domineering arrogance within the capital, so naturally there were many from Yong’an who hated him, and they leapt at this chance to take revenge. Of course, there were also many from Xianle who hated him. Xie Lian had no time for him right now and addressed Lang Ying.

“What do you want? If you want rain, Yong’an will have rain. If you want gold, I’ll push over the golden statues and give them to you. If you want food, I’ll…think of a way. Just, don’t start a war. Can’t we solve this together and find a third path?”

Xie Lian blurted those words in spite of himself. Lang Ying might not have understood what “third path” meant, but he answered without hesitation.

“I don’t want anything, and I don’t need anything. The only thing I want is for the Kingdom of Xianle to cease to exist. I need it to disappear.”

His tone was blank, but his words were fearsome.

A moment later, Xie Lian said gravely, “If you attack…I won’t be able to sit back and watch. You have no chance of winning. Even if all your Yong’an followers will surely die, must you do this?”

“Yes,” Lang Ying said.

“…”

His answer was so calm, so firm, that Xie Lian couldn’t say anything back. His fists clenched and his knuckles cracked.

“I know you’re a god,” Lang Ying said, emphasizing every word. “That’s okay. Even if you’re a god, you can’t stop me.”

Xie Lian knew Lang Ying's words were the truth simply because his tone was more than familiar to him—it was the determination of one steeped in duty, one who would never consider turning back. When Xie Lian said to Jun Wu, *"Even if the heavens say I must die,"* the determination within him was exactly the same as Lang Ying's.

Lang Ying's words were practically a proclamation that he would ceaselessly call forth the people of Yong'an in an endless offense. So Xie Lian knew what he must do.

The sword in Xie Lian's grip was normally held in one hand, but now he gripped it with both. But just as he was about to pierce Lang Ying's throat with his trembling hands, there was suddenly an odd *scrunch, scrunch* sound behind him, and then a cackling laugh.

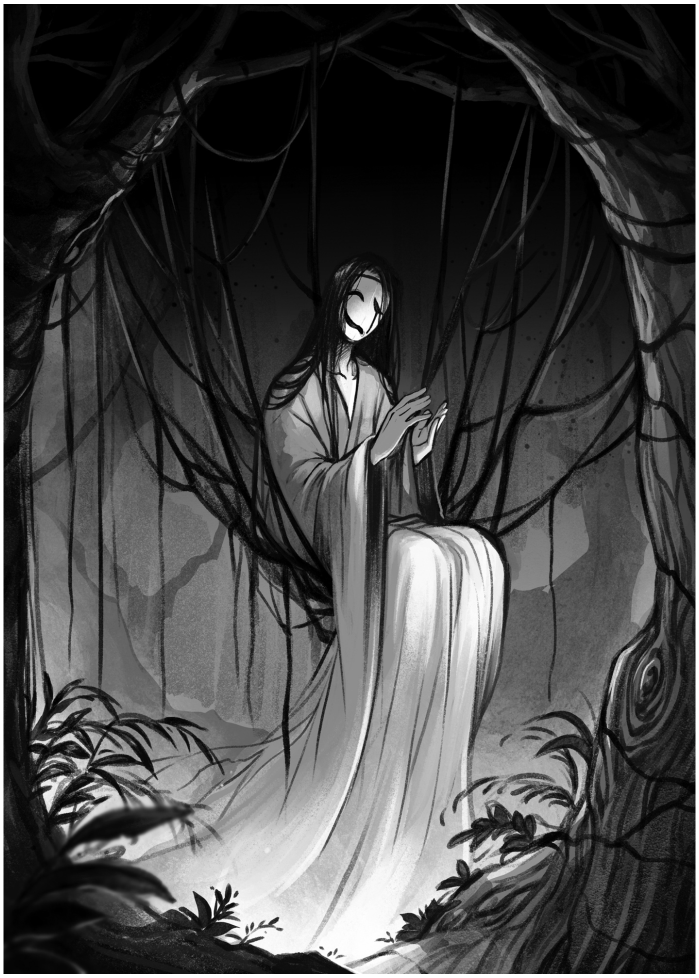
Xie Lian was shocked that anyone could appear so soundlessly, so undetected. When he looked back, his eyes widened.

Normally, enemy soldiers would appear at a time like this—Xie Lian had already had countless swords pointed at him, so he was expecting a sea of blades.

Instead, he saw a single, very odd figure.

That person wore ghastly white funeral clothes, and his face bore a ghastly white mask that was extremely bizarre—one half crying, the other half smiling. He was seated on a vine hung low between two trees, and that *scrunch, scrunch* came from him swaying back and forth on that vine as if it were a swing. When he saw Xie Lian looking back, he raised his hands and slowly clapped, *pah pah*. He cackled again, and the noise raised the hair on Xie Lian's neck.

"What are you?!" Xie Lian said sharply.



What indeed—his instincts told him clearly that this thing wasn't human!

Xie Lian suddenly noticed that the feel of the sword in his hands was wrong, and at the same moment, Qi Rong screamed. When he turned back to look, the ground in front of him had split wide open in a deep fissure, and Lang Ying, who was lying on the ground, was being swallowed by that gap. The ground was rapidly closing its mouth, and without thinking, Xie Lian stabbed into the heart of the earth. He felt the tip of his sword pierce soil, not flesh—only then did Xie Lian realize that he'd failed to kill Lang Ying. He couldn't tell whether he felt regret or relief.

The white-clothed being started cackling again. Xie Lian raised his sword and flung it at him.

The strike was fast as lightning, and it shot through the being and nailed him to the tree behind. He crumpled to the ground without uttering a single sound. Xie Lian rushed over to check, but all that was left was a pile of white robes. The one wearing those robes had disappeared into thin air!

That being's appearance and disappearance were both peculiar to the extreme. Xie Lian was in shock and didn't dare drop his guard.

Picking Qi Rong off the ground with one hand, Xie Lian said, "Let's go."

Yet Qi Rong whined, "Let's not go! Cousin, let's set fire to this mountain! There're a bunch of Yong'an people around; those boorish radicals who wouldn't leave the city gates are all hiding here. Let's set a fire and torch this place clean!"

Xie Lian dragged him away for some distance, and the farther they went, the more Xie Lian felt the air grow thicker and thicker with yin energy. It was as if countless eyes were watching them.

"Did you not just see that odd being?" he snapped. "We shouldn't stick around."

"So what?" Qi Rong asked. "You're a god! You're not afraid of some little devils, are you? If they dare obstruct you, just kill them!"

"Let's go back first," Xie Lian said.

When Xie Lian dismissed his rant out of hand and refused to set the mountain ablaze, Qi Rong's eyes bulged with rage.

"Why?! Those people beat me to a pulp and are bent on antagonizing us! You heard him! He said he wants to annihilate Xianle! He wants to annihilate our kingdom! Why don't you kill them all off like you did today on the battlefield?!"

"…"

Xie Lian's breath hitched, and he shouted angrily, "Why is it always 'Kill! Kill! Kill!' rattling around in your head?! Soldiers and civilians are different!"

"How are they different?" Qi Rong countered. "Aren't they all people? Isn't killing the same thing either way?"

It was like he had stabbed Xie Lian right where it hurt, and a burst of anger roiled up. "You—!"

Just then, he felt something tighten around his ankle. When he looked down, a swollen hand had poked out of the bushes and seized his boot!

From up ahead came several thudding sounds. Seven or eight humanoid forms fell from the trees like rain, and they puddled on the ground, unable to get up. While they were shaped like humans, there was not a shred of clothing on their backs, and they slowly squirmed toward them like giant fleshy worms.

Qi Rong cried out in fright. "Who are they?!"

Xie Lian chopped off the hand with his sword and said darkly, "They're not human, they're binu!"

Xie Lian had never heard of binu sightings in the mountains near the imperial capital before; even if there were nefarious creatures lurking about, they were usually quickly exterminated by the cultivators of the Royal Holy Temple. That meant these binu were intentionally let loose by someone.

Xie Lian never expected this war to involve anything inhuman. But thinking back on everything that had happened, he believed more and more that those things were allied with Lang Ying, and that kidnapping Qi Rong was nothing more than a ploy to lure Xie Lian out. Nonetheless, he had no time to think at the moment. He could cleanly slice seven or eight binu in half with one swing of his sword, but when binu appeared, they usually came in hordes. Sure enough, the bushes and trees all around them started to rustle, and they only shook harder and harder as more and more fleshy forms crawled out and came for Xie Lian. He could kill ten with one strike, but twenty more would lunge that same moment. As Xie Lian struck them endlessly, a binu on a tree focused in on Xie Lian's back and leapt down to seize him!

But before it could come close enough to succeed, it was sliced up in a flash. Qi Rong was unarmed, so it couldn't have been him. Xie Lian turned to look and saw the one who swung the sword—it was that young soldier!

He'd been left in the dust by Xie Lian at the city gates, but he somehow still managed to follow along and find them. Although that boy was carrying nothing but a worn sword, he was still highly effective and struck down many of the binu.

Those things crawled on the ground and secreted thick, glue-like fluids from their bodies, and Qi Rong was screaming at how disgusting they were. He stomped on the head of one that looked weak and noticed that the creature wasn't exactly a threat.

"So they're not that tough?" he asked, bewildered.

But Qi Rong didn't know that binu usually appeared alongside crueler, more violent evils. Xie Lian bit his lip and broke the skin, and wiping the blood on two fingers of his right hand, he smeared it on his blade and shoved the sword into Qi Rong's hands.

"You two, take this sword and go! Nothing will dare approach you. Don't turn back, no matter what you hear. Remember, don't look back!"

"Cousin! I…" Qi Rong protested.

Xie Lian cut him off. "The powerful ones will be coming along right behind them. I won't be able to take care of you once they show up. You need to go back and report!"

Qi Rong didn't reply, just ran away frantically, holding the sword. The sacred sword in his hands held the essence of Xie Lian's divinity, and all along the road no binu or other evils would dare come close; his path was unbound, and he disappeared quickly. The young soldier, however, still didn’t leave. Qi Rong was already long gone, and Xie Lian didn’t have another sacred sword to give him for protection—his only remaining defense was shooting spiritual blasts from his palms. The boy was working hard trying to help, and after an incense time, all the binu were finally exterminated.

The ground was covered in sticky fluids and corpses, and the stench was stifling. Once Xie Lian was sure not a single binu had escaped, he calmed his breath and turned to the boy.

“You’re pretty good with that sword.”

The boy gripped his weapon harder, and although he was still panting, he instantly stood at attention again. “Y-yes, sir.”

“I wasn’t giving you orders, so why are you saying ‘yes, sir’?” Xie Lian asked. “When I ordered you to run, why didn’t you say ‘yes, sir’ then?”

“Yes, sir!” that boy answered, but he realized that his response was strange and stood even stiffer.

Xie Lian shook his head, pondered briefly, and suddenly his lips curled up.

“But you’d be better suited to a saber.”

Chapter 37:
Land of the Tender, Body of Gold Hard-Pressed Against Desire

"WHY?" the boy asked, taken aback.

Xie Lian replayed the boy's strikes and moves in his head, and casually showed him a few example maneuvers.

"You've never used a saber, right? You use a sword, but the sword is tricky. Although it's fast and extremely aggressive, its range is fairly limited. If you've never used a saber before, try it next time. I think you might be even stronger with it."

If ever Xie Lian saw someone with notable skill in martial arts, he couldn't help but want to approach them and chat. Not to criticize—he really was just interested in exchanging ideas. Because he possessed a wealth of experience in combat, he often didn't even need to think; just one glance and he could pick up on the particulars of someone's style. Even if he couldn't explain the *why*, he would instinctively understand. Out of respect for his status, people would usually listen, but there were very few who'd actually pay attention. But this boy listened intently, seeming to mull over every one of his words and looking down at the sword in his hand from time to time.

Xie Lian had rambled on for a while, when suddenly more rustling noises were heard within the woods, like something had quickly crawled past. Xie Lian instantly remembered that they were still in danger and that it really wasn't the time or place to get excited. He immediately grew serious again.

"Who knows if there's more evil on this mountain? This place needs a thorough cleansing."

That boy gave a hard nod and presented his iron sword to Xie Lian with both hands. Xie Lian shook his head.

"Just defend yourself. You didn't leave earlier, and now there's no way for you to flee. I'll do my best to protect you, but you must also stay alert."

Just then, the bushes rustled, and something leapt out. Xie Lian flicked his wrist to shoot a blast from his palm and hit it dead on. A terrible yelp, and that thing stopped moving. There was a strong stench of blood, which puzzled Xie Lian. A binu hit by a blast would leak sticky, viscous body fluids, which didn't have such a strong, bloody smell. He approached to check.

He parted the bushes, and sure enough there was a large binu on the ground, blown into several pieces from the blast. But that smell didn't come from the binu itself. It came from something in its mouth—a scrap of skin off a human head, with chunks of long hair still attached!

Binu were scavengers, and by the look of it, a human had been killed. The binu had left small drops of blood along its trail in the bushes, and Xie Lian immediately followed that trail, the young soldier tagging along right behind. The farther they walked, the denser the blood splatter and the stronger the stench. Soon, they heard feeble weeping.

The little soldier brandished his sword and ran in front of Xie Lian to shield him, but Xie Lian pulled the boy back behind him. The trail wound past a field of blooming shrubs, and a sizable cave appeared before them.

This cave had probably once served as a temporary shelter for passersby, but now, corpses carpeted the ground. Twenty or thirty binu were clambering over those dead bodies, chomping on them to their hearts' content.

Several of them surrounded a young woman. Her belly had been ripped open and her innards were spilling out, but she was somehow still alive—and clearly in great pain. There was a bright red flower in her hair, as if she'd been interrupted in the middle of dressing herself. The fresh blood complementing that crimson blossom painted a particularly cruel picture.

The binu were licking at her hot, steaming organs, but just before they started to gnaw at her flesh in earnest, the sound of someone approaching made them turn to look. Xie Lian sent out a blast from his palm without blinking, slaying them all in a flash. He immediately moved on to checking the dead bodies—among the corpses were men and women, old and young, all dressed in clothes made of humble cloth, their faces ashen. They were doubtlessly Yong'an civilians, and Xie Lian couldn't help but be shocked.

He had thought the strange, white-clothed creature had called forth these nefarious beings. He had saved Lang Ying, so they had to be allies—but then why would the binu feast on these Yong'an civilians? Inhuman creatures would never form a pact with humans unless they had a reason, so were these the terms Lang Ying agreed to for the alliance? Were the lives of his followers his bargaining chips?!

The young woman was terrified and in agony. Blood sputtered from her lips as she sobbed, "Don't kill me! I didn't do anything bad, don't kill me!"

Xie Lian couldn't help but remember the family of three who had died below the city wall—what sins had they committed? He bent down and soothed her in a gentle voice.

"Don't be scared. Everything's okay, I'm here to save you."

Yet that little soldier still had his sword pointed at the young woman. "Your Highness, be careful. She might be an evil spirit from the deep mountains."

Of course Xie Lian knew that was a possibility, but after much consideration, he still felt that he couldn't leave her like this; as long as he was prudent, it would probably be fine. He checked the young woman's pulse and inspected her palms and fingers for prints, instantly confirming that she was indeed a human—and one who had never practiced martial arts, as her arms were weak and powerless. Taking a bottle of medicine from his sleeve, he immediately began treating her wounds. He twisted the cork out, and a faint, fragrant white smoke slowly filled the air.

This medicine could temporarily slow down any poison and was amazingly effective at treating wounds. Xie Lian wasn't stingy with that holy cure, using the entire bottle on her.

"Do you feel better?"

The young woman's wounds were a ghastly sight to behold, but after breathing in the smoke, some color returned to her face. She nodded weakly.

“Are you from Yong’an? How did this happen?” Xie Lian asked.

Tears rolled down her face. “I…I am. I don’t know how it happened. Every—” She paused and hissed in pain. “Everything was fine, but suddenly, my dad died, my older brother died too…”

Xie Lian gently patted her shoulders. “Who killed them? Or rather, *what* killed them?”

The young woman sobbed. “The killer was…was…was *you*!”

At that last word, her face contorted with savage rage, and her eyes flashed and bulged. She opened her arms and pounced, seizing Xie Lian in an embrace!

The young soldier had been standing beside Xie Lian on high alert the whole time, and he reacted with incredible quickness to this attack, immediately piercing her heart with his sword. She was already severely wounded, and with that strike, her death should’ve been swift. And yet she began laughing in uproarious delight, clinging to Xie Lian with a deadly grip and refusing to let go, and she remained like that until she finally stopped breathing. She clung on so tightly that the young soldier strained to peel her dead body off.

“Your Highness! Are you okay?” he asked anxiously.

Xie Lian had thought that the young woman was trying to ambush him as a last-ditch effort. Yet she had no weapons on her, and she didn’t even bite or scratch—she only clung on to him tightly as if that was enough, unrelenting even after death.

Confounded, he replied, “I’m all right, I…”

He trailed off when, as if mocking him, he was assaulted by a sudden dizziness.

The little soldier widened his one bright eye. “Your Highness?!”

It was like Xie Lian’s insides were on fire; he couldn’t speak, didn’t want to speak, and didn’t want to hear anyone else speak either. He shook his head and raised his hand, mute.

Just then, the sound of women’s giggling came from all around them.

“Hee hee hee hee hee…”

"Hee hee hee hee hee…"

The two of them realized with a start that there wasn't a third person nearby. The giggling came from the bright red flower!

Xie Lian instantly realized he'd fallen into a trap.

Land of the Tender!

This "Land of the Tender" wasn't the coy euphemism for houses of pleasure where men found solace in feminine charms. These Land of the Tenders were flower yao that loved to flock together and survived by sucking away the essence of men.

Their fragrance was dangerous, and Xie Lian immediately cautioned, "Cover your mouth and nose tight—don't breathe in that flower's fragrance!"

The young soldier already had a layer of filter from the bandages wrapped around his face, so he didn't breathe in any of the scent. Hearing Xie Lian, he tightened his bandages—but then he realized Xie Lian had nothing to cover his own nose and mouth with, so he ripped a piece from the cleanest part of his sleeve, rubbed it hard and patted it down until it was cleaner, and then passed it to him with both hands.

"No need," Xie Lian said. "It's too late."

He'd been on his guard while he was treating that young woman, but he didn't guard against smell. He'd been close to her, not knowing that the flower pinned in her hair was a Land of the Tender blossom. Before she died, she clung on firmly to Xie Lian, ensuring she wouldn't fail in her mission. This meant that Xie Lian had already inhaled many lungsful of that Tender Fragrance, truly "refreshing" his spirit.

Once the Tender Fragrance entered a man's body, he would enter a state of agitation—it began with weakness of the limbs, then progressed to mania. Xie Lian's whole body was already listless, like all of his tendons had been removed. But once the numbness passed, he'd be like a cask of explosives. If that strange, white-clothed creature appeared once more, Xie Lian really didn't know whether he'd be able to face off with it—he wasn't sure of its power in the first place. His initial reaction was to reach for his bottle of medicine, but then he realized that he'd emptied it to help the young woman. And in the end, she still didn't survive.

He glanced at the dead body next to him. The young woman wore a happy smile, like she was sincerely glad she'd managed to snare the enemy in a trap before death, and she could finally pass in peace to join her family. Xie Lian could only blame the gory scene that paled the flower's dangerous shade, and the stench of blood that masked the blossom's strange fragrance. He had never imagined that the face of a young girl, only in her teens, could bear such vicious resentment, or that she could commit such an extreme act.

Around him, the flower yao were exploding with excitement.

"He took the bait!"

"Caught him!"

"Is it really His Highness the Crown Prince?"

"It's him!"

"He's so handsome…my root, my root can't hold back any longer, it's going to thrust out of the ground!"

The young soldier slashed with his sword, clearing out the flower shrubs surrounding them. Yet the stems were nimble, and that sword was worn; after one slash, it dulled. The flower yao rocked back and forth, squealing.

"My gosh! This little gege—your bush hasn't even grown in yet, but you're so ferocious! I'm on the verge of blooming, so how will you repay me?!"

The young soldier's eye flashed with rage. "You're dead! I'm gonna burn you all to death!"

The flower yao curved their green leaves to touch their stems like they were placing their hands on their hips. "My, so scary! We didn't provoke you, so why are you so mad?!"

"Don't burn them!" Xie Lian warned. "They're yao, so if you set them on fire, they'll emit poisonous gas—you can't pull them out either!" That boy immediately dropped his hands that were ready to pluck, and Xie Lian explained weakly, "There are poisonous thorns all over the stems…"

"My gosh, Your Highness is so sweet, thank you for protecting us," the flower yao flirtatiously cooed. "Just wait, we're going to bear fruit soon! We'll definitely take very good care of you, hee hee hee hee…"

"Men who've cultivated abstinence from birth are so hard to come by! Even if your power will drop a level if we deflower you, there's no other way, sorry! Hee hee hee hee…"

As they giggled, the Land of the Tenders' petals rubbed against each other. Their ambrosial perverse intentions were more than obvious. That young soldier was bewildered, not quite understanding the meaning of "abstinence," "deflower," or "level." But he could still tell that they didn't mean anything good, so he kept swinging his sword madly, cutting down the flowers and roaring in rage, trying desperately to silence that teasing laughter, not wanting Xie Lian to hear. Xie Lian, on the other hand, was cracking his knuckles.

So that was it!

Everything that transpired tonight was designed specifically to deal with him.

In kidnapping Qi Rong, they had bet on his pride and duty as the martial god of Xianle—that he would choose to go after them alone, minimizing their risk. And that seriously wounded young woman was bait to make him use up his medicine, leaving him powerless to save himself. The cooperation between humans and yao was meant to lead him to this point.

Xie Lian's method of cultivation required a pure body. Those who worshipped the ascended cultivators who practiced this path were firmly convinced of the transcendence of gods untouched by earthly desires. If they couldn't protect their purity, their following would no doubt collapse and their powers would be devastated. It wouldn't be as serious as plunging from godhood back to mortality, and there was still the possibility of recovery after many more years of cultivation—but with things as they were now, there was no time for him to sit behind closed doors and cultivate for years!

The statute of purity was strict at the Royal Holy Temple, and Xie Lian excelled. He was number one in upholding those rules, as he had never broken or breached any of them. He thought himself as steady as a boulder of iron, and not even howling gales could ripple the still water in his heart. He'd undergone many trials and completed them perfectly each time. Yet even if his heart was like still water, he was nonetheless young and thinskinned. Not to mention there was a little soldier right beside him. Xie Lian couldn't help feeling embarrassed as he was forced to listen to those flower yao blatantly splash their depraved words onto him as that lingering fragrance boiled his blood. His face colored with a humiliated blush, but no matter how much he abhorred his current predicament, he just couldn't stand up.

He was still hanging on for the moment, but if those Land of the Tenders really bore fruit, it'd be big trouble. The best course of action would of course be to return to the imperial capital as soon as possible and have Feng Xin and Mu Qing shield him, but Xie Lian's legs were limp, and he could barely stand.

Out of options, he called to the little soldier in a strained tone, "You…come over here."

At the sound of his voice, the young soldier visibly flinched and froze. He hesitantly turned around but didn't dare go over. Yet the situation at hand didn't allow for any time wasted; seeing his hesitation, temper flared in Xie Lian's chest, but he forced it down.

"Don't be scared, I won't do anything to you. Get over here, quick!"

At last, the boy moved. He rushed close to Xie Lian's side but came to an abrupt stop two steps away. Xie Lian soundlessly drew in a small breath and extended a hand toward him.

"Help me up… Take me away."

That young soldier very carefully took his hand and grasped it. He was like a man on the brink of death who had finally found someone to rely on; Xie Lian's whole body slackened in an instant, and he collapsed onto the boy.

He was awash in the Tender Fragrance; his temperature boiled and his body burned. Somehow, the boy's trembling hands were equally hot.

Xie Lian leaned on him for a bit to regain some strength, then breathed in and pushed himself to stand upright. He didn't want to force someone smaller than him to support his person entirely, but with the boy's help, he walked a few agonizing steps. The flower yao called out to him when they saw them moving away.

“No, Your Highness, don’t leave us! *He* is waiting for you on the road. If you leave here, you’ll bump into *him*.”

He?

“Who’s ‘he’?” Xie Lian demanded.

The Land of the Tenders were clearly terrified by just the mention of this mystery being. After some hesitation, they mumbled a response.

“He is *him*.”

The flowers all nodded to each other.

“He is *him*. The one who brought us here.”

Even if they didn’t dare speak the person’s name, that half-crying half-smiling mask immediately surfaced in Xie Lian’s mind.

“So what you’re saying is that if I leave now, the one who planted you will hunt me down on the road, but if I stay here, he won’t come. Correct?”

The flower yao were pleased and chattered in the affirmative, nodding their heads. An unknown fury blazed in Xie Lian’s chest.

To trap him in this unspeakable situation without even having the decency to try to kill him—were they playing with him or what? Why not simply battle to the death?

He collected himself and forced down his irritation. It seemed the other party had no intention of facing him head-on—they only wanted to damage his spiritual power by making him fall from grace and lose devotees.

Or the flower yao could be lying. But even if that were the case, Xie Lian wasn’t sure they’d be able to return safely, even if the boy could support him or carry him on his back. Should the other party purposely throw some women at them halfway down the road, the situation could get worse—or at least become even more awkward.

After some deliberation, Xie Lian exhaled a feverish breath and closed his eyes.

“Take me to the cave over there.”

That young soldier followed his instructions and helped him cross the corpse-strewn ground. When they reached the cave mouth, Xie Lian gave a throaty gasp.

“Stop.”

The little soldier halted. Even a simple gesture like raising a hand had Xie Lian shaking uncontrollably.

“Where’s your sword?”

The boy shifted him to his left arm and freed the right to brandish his sword. Xie Lian peeled back his sleeves and revealed part of his arm. Under the glowing moonlight, his skin was smooth and pale as the softest white jade. That boy’s breath suddenly hitched, but Xie Lian didn’t notice.

“Stab me,” he ordered in a husky voice.

The hand that held up the worn sword immediately drooped.

“Don’t worry, just stab me,” Xie Lian urged him. “Stab deeply. I need to draw an array. There are no other spiritual devices on hand, so we need blood.”

“Your Highness, please use my blood!” the young soldier protested, and he raised his own arm and cut without any hesitation.

“No need!” Xie Lian hurriedly replied. “Your blood…”

But his words didn’t make it in time. A deep gash had already been drawn on the boy’s arm, and fresh blood flowed from it. Xie Lian sighed.

“You…never mind.”

Xie Lian’s blood was an invaluable holy treasure with the power to sanctify, so how could a mortal’s blood compare? But seeing how earnest this little soldier was, he didn’t have the heart to tell him that what he’d done was pointless.

“Thanks,” he said instead. “But we still need some of my blood as a catalyst.”

Xie Lian took the sword with trembling hands. It took him a few tries to successfully pierce the middle of his forearm. Vivid red holy blood streamed down his pale white arm, and he used it to drip two curved lines in front of the cave, drawing two barriers. It could be said to be a waste of heaven's gift. Xie Lian also took care to mix in some of the boy's blood. As he completed the array, his dizziness grew stronger.

"Let's go in…"

It was pitch black inside the cave. The boy took out a small flare torch from inside his robes and ignited it. The intense firelight brightened their surroundings.

The young soldier's face was hidden behind his bandages that covered him completely, while Xie Lian's unkempt state was on display for all to see. His cold sweat was sticky, his hair was disheveled, his lips were red and swollen and smeared with blood from when he'd bitten his lip to sanctify his sword earlier. The firelight stabbed at Xie Lian's eyes, hurting them, and the waves of heat pouring off the torch tormented him.

"Don't light the fire," Xie Lian demanded immediately. "Kill it."

That boy immediately threw the flare torch on the ground and stepped on it to extinguish it, and they sank into darkness once more. Once they were inside the cave, Xie Lian sat down and arranged himself into a meditative position. Moments later, he spoke laboriously.

"I have a mission for you. Are you up for it?"

"…" The boy dropped to the ground and kneeled. "I'm willing to risk my life to do my duty!"

Xie Lian painfully restrained his labored breathing and continued with forced calm. "I drew two sets of barriers in front of the cave. The outer barrier is to ensure nothing outside enters; the inner barrier is to prevent anyone inside from exiting."

He silently panted for a few breaths before he continued.

"There's enough space between the two barriers for one person. Stay there and watch over the cave entrance. No matter what you hear outside, do not leave. Likewise, do not come in no matter what sounds you hear from me."

The boy was slightly perplexed. "Your Highness, you're staying here by yourself?"

"Yes," Xie Lian said. "I don't know what I'll do… In any case, do not come in, no matter what happens."

Under the circumstances, Xie Lian couldn't move very far. But as far as waiting for reinforcements, Qi Rong was probably still stumbling down the road, and just getting back to the imperial capital would take a long while. Who knew when help would come? The only thing he could do was temporarily seal off this small area, set up wards, and figure out a way to treat the Tender Fragrance.

"Fruits born of flower yao are powerful temptresses," he rasped. "They're likely to ripen soon…"

Just then, the fragrance in the air suddenly surged, cutting off his words. That beguiling scent filled the air from the earth to the sky, and the flower yao cackled ecstatically.

"*My root!* My root is hard!"

"The fruits have ripened!" they trumpeted.

Smelling that excessively sweet fragrance, Xie Lian could feel his heart beating faster, and blood rushed to his brain. He gritted his teeth.

"Hurry and go! Don't breathe in the scent, and if they come close, don't be scared. Nothing can cross the blood line, but as long as your feet remain inside the barrier you can strike them with your sword."

That boy glanced outside and gave a hard nod. He rushed out with his sword in hand, stationing himself between the two blood lines by the entrance. Outside the cave, in that field of corpses, the flowering plants were growing more and more vibrant in color. The briar field was quivering as if something beneath was about to burst from the ground…until, not long later, something *did* burst forth—the head of a woman!

The woman's head that had sprouted breathed in the fresh air above ground and appeared drunk with joy, her eyes squeezing shut into crescent lines. Following immediately after was a round, smooth shoulder, then an entire arm.

The fruits of the Land of the Tender were formed under the whiskers of their roots. They ripened in the shape of feminine forms, and the time was indeed ripe—countless naked women were breaking out from beneath the earth. They plucked the bright red blossoms from atop their heads and bathed under the moonlight, stretching out their limbs to their hearts' content. Those little flowers had emitted the fragrant scent at first, but now the ones secreting that sweet odor were the enchanting women. They patted off the mud that smeared their voluptuous bodies, fixed their hair, and walked toward the cave as they giggled alluringly.

“Your Highness, we’re coming!”

That sweet fragrance was suffocating inside the cave. Xie Lian sat in the lotus position with his eyes closed, chanting the *Dao De Jing* in his mind. However, it helped little; the flower yao called to him shamelessly, chirping all sorts of too-familiar pet names—baby, sweetheart, gege, didi. It was throwing his mind into turmoil, so Xie Lian tried reciting out loud.

“The five colors cause blindness the five sounds cause deafness…indulgent hunts cause madness rare goods cause lawlessness…calm over impatience cold over heat silence is the ultimate virtue…be kind to those who are kind, be kind to those who are unkind…”

Xie Lian didn’t notice that his recitation was incoherent as he stumbled over the scripture he could usually recite flawlessly, backward and forward.

Outside the cave, the flower yao clapped and laughed tauntingly.

“My dear Crown Prince, my sweetheart, my good Highness, you’re not a monk, why are you reciting sutras—*aiyoh!*”

Shrieking erupted from all around. It sounded like although the young soldier had been silent all that time, he’d grown furious at the flower yao and had begun chopping and slashing, madly chasing them away from the entrance as they wailed.

“Murderer!”

“You cursed little brat, destroyer of beauty!” some accused from a distance. “No tenderness in your heart at all!”

“Scary, scary! So brutal at such a young age! Imagine him fully grown!”

Like starving beasts, the flower yao relentlessly tried to squeeze themselves into the cave, but they just couldn’t manage it. They didn’t notice the blood array on the ground and thought they were being blocked by the boy alone.

After some discussion amongst themselves, they gathered not too far away and called to him.

“Little gege, why must you stop us from going in? It’s not like we’re going to do anything bad. We just want to have a good time with His Highness!”

“Be good, little soldier, and don’t hinder us from doing His Highness some good too.”

“That little didi is so mean. A shame that he’s so young and tender. He probably doesn’t even know what ‘doing good’ means!”

The flower yao fell all over themselves in another round of mocking giggles. Xie Lian cracked his eyes open a slit, but he could see nothing aside from a black shadow standing at the entrance of the cave. It was the shadow of that boy, sword in hand, who was determined not to move, even in death.

Suddenly, one of the flower yao said, “Hey, little gege, don’t root yourself there like a stiff shaft. What do *you* want? Why not come with me over there to have some fun? What sort do you fancy? Am I your type?”

The young soldier still didn’t respond. Those flower yao thought in order to enter the cave they must go through him, so they all brought forth all their tricks, coddling him with their words.

“What about me?”

“How about this? Am I pretty?”

“Look at me, do you like this?”

Starting with flirtation, changing to complaints, and then devolving to curses—regardless of their tactics, the boy still ignored them while they were far away and struck at them if they drew near. Xie Lian knew that before Land of the Tenders emerged from the ground, they could change their shapes at will. He wanted to warn the boy, but due to his distressing predicament, he didn’t dare open his mouth.

Finally, when at last those heavy waves of heat passed, he managed to gasp, “Don’t look at them…”

It was exhausting enough simply fighting the hot blood that rushed to his head, so Xie Lian’s voice was terribly soft and hushed. But that young soldier heard him instantly and called out in response, “*Yes, sir!* Your Highness, how…how are you?”

“I’m fine,” Xie Lian said. “If things become difficult to bear, shut your eyes, seal your nose and mouth…”

The young soldier hadn’t had a chance to answer when another flower yao suddenly burst out laughing.

“I know! Little guy, I bet your favorite type must look like this!”

It sounded as though a new Land of the Tender had emerged from the soil. A sudden dead silence descended outside the cave. That young soldier seemed to have stopped breathing.

In the next second, the crashing waves of laughter from the flower yao surged against Xie Lian, drowning him. The flower yao clapped and screeched.

“*Aiyooh!* What a play! What a plaaaaaay!”

“My *god*! How did you come up with this? You slay me… Ha ha ha ha ha ha… Look! That brat is completely stunned! I bet you figured him out!”

“This must be it! And here I thought that damned brat was a rock. But who knew how wrong we were! Such *balls* for somebody so young!”

“You win! We’re *nothing*! How about it, little guy? Come quick and enjoy this sweet, delicious sight!”

“This is your chance—you won’t find another shop that serves *this* dish if you leave this land of ours. If you don’t seize this opportunity, you’ll never get a taste, even if you dream of it for eight hundred years! Or do you want us to give you a hand? What a state you’re in…hee hee hee hee…”

The young soldier was thoroughly incensed, and his voice was icy as frost. “You…are…seeking…*death*!”

Meanwhile, Xie Lian was about to reach his limit inside the cave.

His sight blurred, and his ears pounded with rushing blood; he could no longer sit up straight. He collapsed forward and barely managed to keep himself off the ground with his hands. Taking that tumble loosened his gritted teeth, and in that moment of delirium, a pained, wretched moan escaped his lips.

Xie Lian swiftly covered his mouth the moment the sound leaked, but the young soldier still whipped around.

“Your Highness…?”

Supporting himself with one hand, Xie Lian used the other to cover his mouth. His breathing was labored and erratic, and his shoulders convulsed and trembled. Seeing him, listening to him, one would probably assume he was weeping.

Never in his life, before or after ascension, had Xie Lian experienced such a grueling ordeal. This was much more arduous than the toughest trial at the Royal Holy Temple. The strength of the arm that supported his weight failed, and his body keeled over to the side. As he lay on the ground, delirious and barely conscious, he saw the boy looking like he wanted to enter.

“Don’t come in!” Xie Lian barked. “I said not to come in no matter what you hear!”

That boy stopped in his tracks. Xie Lian laboriously flipped over onto his back and somehow managed to regulate his breathing despite the waves of heat that pulsed and spread throughout every inch of his body. The flower yao outside the cave heard him tossing and turning as that intense fire consumed him, and they clapped as they cackled.

“My good Highness, why be so hard on yourself?! Today you’re refusing yourself a good time because you’re scared of losing devotees, tomorrow you’ll be scared to do other things because you’re scared of losing devotees—is that any way for a heavenly official to live? You’re more like a prisoner, with your hands bound by those who worship you! It’s not worth it, being a god like that. You’re gonna lose your place in heaven sooner or later, so why not just enjoy yourself now? Things come and go, no need to mind the petty details!”

Xie Lian briefly lost control of his temper, and veins faintly bulged on his forehead.

“Shut up!” he shouted, outraged.

The flower yao naturally weren't afraid of him right now, and they started teasing the little soldier anew.

"Little didi, don't you agree? Ha ha ha ha…"

"Hee hee hee… Aren't you feeling miserable just standing there?"

His body was already miserably drenched in cold sweat. Exceedingly hot and bothered, Xie Lian violently tore at his robes in search of even a faint breath of cool air. As he tore, he suddenly noticed—had strength returned to his arms? Although that energy didn't last long, leaving just as quickly as it came, he confirmed that the numbness had indeed passed. His vigor was gradually increasing, and yet Xie Lian's heart sank.

The Tender Fragrance inflicted numbness at first, followed by mania. The numbness had passed, which meant that madness and passion would poison his veins at any moment. Although he'd drawn two barriers at the entrance of the cave, the interior one was made specifically to prevent his crazed self from charging out. But once mania seized him, he wasn't sure whether the barrier would really be enough to stop him. This moment of clarity was a rare blessing, and Xie Lian clung to it with both hands, his mind rapidly pouring over ways to handle the situation.

Suddenly, a realization occurred to him—the Tender Fragrance worked fast, and usually all control would be lost the moment one's blood rushed to their brain. So how had he managed to stay afloat until now? Was the only reason really the exceptional steadiness of his mind?

With that thought, Xie Lian drew a long breath and tilted his head. He called out to the boy's silhouette at the cave's entrance, who was still looking indecisive about entering.

"You…come in."

The young soldier looked like he wanted to dash over to his side immediately, but after a few steps, he seemed to remember Xie Lian's furious instruction, *"Don't come in, no matter what you hear,"* and he hesitated. Xie Lian felt terrible for changing his mind so quickly, but he called to him again in misery.

"Just come inside now."

The boy stopped hesitating and rushed in.

The cave's interior was a long, narrow tunnel, warm and humid. Darkness shrouded the space; one couldn't even see their hand in front of their face. That boy used Xie Lian's rasping breaths to find where he lay.

"Put down your sword… Put it on the ground," Xie Lian instructed. "Right next to me. Not too far away."

"Yes, sir!" The young soldier heeded him and handed over his only defense, placing it where Xie Lian could easily reach.

"Please help me up," Xie Lian asked.

The boy half knelt next to him and extended both arms to help support Xie Lian. However, when he reached out, he touched not fabric but feverish skin.

His hands immediately shrank back. Xie Lian himself felt burned by the boy's hot hands, and only then did he remember he'd torn off his upper robes in his manic state. A man naked from the waist up usually wasn't anything scandalous, though the current circumstances were slightly awkward. But there was no need to highlight their predicament; they just needed to do what they must. The boy seemed to realize it as well, and he didn't wait for Xie Lian to say anything. He simply reached out again to circle his arm around Xie Lian's bare shoulders, helping him up, and then immediately letting go. Xie Lian leaned against the wall of the tunnel, and with his back pressed against the cool rock, he felt some relief.

Noticing that the boy had backed a few steps away, he hurriedly said, "Wait, don't leave yet!"

That young soldier heeded his every word. He halted immediately.

"Cut off a lock of my hair," Xie Lian said. "I need it for something."

The boy acknowledged the order and reached out again. But the darkness made him clumsy, and with Xie Lian's long locks tied cleanly behind his back, his first contact wasn't with the man's hair. Instead, his fingers met the skin of Xie Lian's chest—skin that was soft and supple with a light mist of sweat. Xie Lian was already in torment from that touch when the boy accidentally brushed against something sensitive. It was like a bolt of lightning jolted through his chest. Pleasure spread throughout his whole body, forcing a soft moan from him.

The pair in that cave instantly froze.

The flower yao outside the cave were desperately trying to listen in, so how could they miss it? They giggled.

“My gosh, what are they doing in there?”

“So embarrassing!”

“I dare not listen!”

Xie Lian gritted his teeth at the sound of them mocking his suffering. *“You—!”*

Hearing Xie Lian’s fury, the boy immediately dropped his hands, afraid to make any more contact. Obviously, Xie Lian wasn’t furious at him—in his eyes that little soldier was nothing more than a child. He softened his tone, thinking the boy was probably scared of offending him.

“Don’t panic—just keep going,” he said. “Don’t mind them.”

“Yes, sir,” the boy croaked.

Still, he was clearly flustered—he felt up everywhere he shouldn’t, and every time he found that he’d touched the wrong place, his hands shrunk back. In the end, the only way he found Xie Lian’s hair was to trace his hands up that bare chest, sparking unspeakable pleasure and agony in Xie Lian. Such misery—Xie Lian longed to smash his head against the tunnel wall and knock himself out for good. Finally, the boy felt his way to Xie Lian’s throbbing Adam’s apple and reached behind his neck to grasp a lock of hair. With only a few strands in his grip, he very carefully cut them with the sword.

“Your Highness, it’s done!” he cried immediately.

Another small surge of strength returned to Xie Lian, and he raised his palm. “Give me your hand.”

The boy obeyed, and Xie Lian retrieved the long, thin strands and tied them in a knot on one of his fingers.

"Your Highness, what's this?" the boy asked with a quavering voice, baffled.

Xie Lian sighed. "The flower yao's poison is about to enter the second stage. I need to borrow your sword. If anything wants to harm you later, raise this hand and it will protect you. Now, leave."

A moment passed, and the young soldier returned to the entrance of the cave. The flower yao grew rowdy again.

"You're out?"

"Finally."

"Blocking us outside like that while you went in to have fun yourself—you're not very nice, kiddo!"

Meanwhile, Xie Lian could feel more strength surging through his limbs. He inhaled deeply and grabbed the young soldier's worn sword in his right hand. He composed himself, then raised the sword and made a cut on his left arm.

In a flash, it was like the fog had lifted, and his senses slowly returned.

He knew it!

Blood streamed down Xie Lian's left arm, but it was like he'd finally grasped a lifeline in the midst of this chaos. The fragrance of Land of the Tender could aggravate one's temper and arouse deep, slumbering urges. Typically, the stronger the repressed urge, the stronger the rebound after breathing in the fragrance. As for what Xie Lian had repressed…other than lust, it was the urge to kill.

This murderous bloodlust couldn't be directed at nefarious creatures. He had slain many such evils in the past, so he'd never repressed that desire. The target had to be a human or god to inflict a sense of transgression. Before entering the cave, Xie Lian had cut himself to draw the arrays, and so blood was spilled. It was somewhat effective against the Tender Fragrance, because injuring himself was also a form of inflicting harm.

At the end of the day, lust and murder were both wildly aggressive desires—Xie Lian had even heard that some considered them to stem from the same origin, their nature one and the same. Using himself as evidence of this theory, there was indeed an alternative method to pass the current trial.

Sure of his own reasoning, Xie Lian slashed another cut on his left arm without hesitation, and every cut brought more wisps of clarity to his mind. He was too busy rejoicing at this to realize that the Tender Fragrance was stirring more evil within his body—the instant his bloodlust was satiated, a wave of pleasure crashed over him.

That sudden surge coursed through every inch of him from head to toe, effortlessly breaking the defensive walls he had painstakingly built. By the time Xie Lian had realized it, he was already quietly moaning.

If he wasn't alone in the cave, Xie Lian wouldn't be able to believe that sound came from his throat. He shuddered violently, and his eyes grew wide as he thought, *This method should've worked! Why would this happen?*

He glanced at the sword and suddenly remembered: the young soldier had used it to cut the stems of the flowers and to strike the humanoid flower yao. The blade was covered in the sap from the Land of the Tenders. He used a fifth of his power to make the first cut on his arm, but he could only achieve the same relief if he used a third of his power to make the next cut. It was like drinking poison to quench his thirst.

The madness must've gone to his head, as he otherwise surely would have noticed this. Xie Lian cursed himself internally, but as he'd already committed the act, he could only rip off a piece of his left sleeve to wipe madly at the sword, then tear off his right sleeve to stuff it in his mouth, biting down on it mulishly and doing his best to restrain himself.

The quiet moans were forcibly cut off by bitten lips and gritted teeth, but noises echoed within caves, so every small sound was amplified and reverberated outward. The boy had heeded his instructions and covered his eyes, using only his sense of hearing to work, and in doing so his ears became more sensitive; there was no way he had missed hearing something strange.

Unable to hold back any longer, the boy asked with a quavering voice, "Your Highness?"

Wallowing in such an unspeakable state was the biggest humiliation of Xie Lian's life. He could hardly imagine what would happen should anyone see him like this—even submerged in darkness, he could not tolerate the thought.

"Don't come in!" he yelled.

However, that piece of cloth was still stuffed in his mouth, and his command just sounded like muffled whimpering, exceedingly pitiful and wretched. The young soldier became even more anxious at the sound.

Xie Lian's left arm was already bleeding profusely from that self-inflicted gash, but at the end of the day, it was only self-harm, not murder, and so the urge wasn't entirely fulfilled. His mouth slackened, and the piece of cloth fell from his lips.

Xie Lian stabbed his left leg next, with increasing brutality. It was a deep stab, and the thick sound of the blade penetrating his flesh echoed through the cave. The young soldier couldn't stand back anymore and dropped his hands to rush toward him. But the sound of his hurried footsteps had Xie Lian scrambling away in terror. Even when his back was pressed against the wall, he continued to push backward, cowering.

"No, no, *no*! Don't come near me, don't…"

The second blood barrier by the entrance of the cave was drawn especially to stop Xie Lian, but it wouldn't stop that boy—he still had a chance to return to safety. The poison from the Tender Fragrance was about to enter the second stage, and if that boy approached, Xie Lian could end his life right then and there, giving him no chance to escape. He was terrified he'd kill the child by accident. All he could do was avoid him.

The young soldier heard the panic in his voice and called out in concern and confusion, "Your Highness…"

The bloodlust was boiling in his veins. He raised the worn sword with his shuddering hand, and a voice inside his head screamed, *I will not die, I will not die,* I will not die!

The next moment, in a split-second decision, he turned his blade.

In the darkness, the young soldier could see the flash of cold metal, and he cried, "Your Highness!"

The sword struck, penetrating Xie Lian’s own stomach. He’d nailed himself firmly onto the ground!

A sharp pain exploded from his abdomen, spreading throughout his whole body and dispersing the heat. Xie Lian’s hands gripped the hilt tightly, and his eyes flashed. He choked out a cough, and a thin trail of blood flowed down from the corner of his lips. His breathing stopped, and his body stilled. The young soldier was left in dumbfounded shock, and he fell to his knees next to his body.

Screeching and shrieking began outside the cave.

“Who are you?!”

The voices of the flower yao were delicate but shrill, and their shrieks were piercing to the ear. And yet there was another who thundered louder, dominating all their cries.

“What the *hell*?!”

Hearing that angry roar, Xie Lian suddenly sucked in breath anew.

Feng Xin!

“Land of the Tenders,” another muffled voice said. “If you don’t want to get poisoned, cover your face.”

That was Mu Qing, of course, who clearly already had his face covered. Feng Xin seemed to have seen something, and gave an angry, muffled shout through the suggested face covering.

“Is that…Your Highness? Your Highness?! Fuck! What the *fuck*?! What’s the meaning of this?!”

Mu Qing let out an “eh?” then commented, “What an indecent sight! How outrageous!”

His tone didn’t sound as angry as Feng Xin’s, more like he was reacting to a bad joke. Xie Lian was still inside the cave and couldn’t hear exactly what they were saying, but he could guess that those flower yao were probably parading their naked selves before them and generally being highly inappropriate.

Feng Xin was cursing uproariously. “Hurry and get rid of them now! Don’t let anyone else see this!”

Soon, all he heard was the screaming and cursing of the female yao, which gradually faded.

"Make sure to exterminate them thoroughly," Mu Qing lectured. "The scent from this type of yao is poisonous, and if there are any leftover seedlings they'll just come back."

Xie Lian sucked in a breath, waited, and then coughed weakly once. The other two immediately heard him and charged to the cave, yelling.

"Your Highness, are you in there?"

"I'm here…" Xie Lian replied.

Even though he tried to steady his voice, it was still weaker than normal. The two of them rushed over but were stopped by the barriers outside the cave's entrance. However, they were familiar with arrays drawn by Xie Lian and knew how to break them. Feng Xin ignited a palm torch as he walked in, but before the deepest part of the cave was illuminated, he suddenly called out.

"Who's there?"

Mu Qing was alarmed as well. "Is there someone else in the cave?"

"Don't worry. Just a little soldier," Xie Lian said.

The two calmed down and entered. The firelight brightened the entire cave with a warm orangey glow and illuminated Xie Lian—who lay there sprawled on the ground, his long hair strewn around him, his upper robes completely peeled off, and a long sword impaling his abdomen and nailing him to the ground.

The two were horrified by the sight.

Feng Xin leaned down. "Who did this?!"

"Me," Xie Lian replied.

Mu Qing was aghast. "What happened?"

Xie Lian shook his head. "I don't want to talk about it. I only went this far because there was no other way. Hurry and free me."

Mu Qing approached and pulled out the sword with a frown, tossing it to the side with a clang; the young soldier retrieved it. Feng Xin helped Xie Lian sit up and covered him with an outer robe. Only then did Xie Lian finally give them a rough account of his ghastly night with the Land of the Tenders.

“You two came faster than I expected. Where’s Qi Rong?”

“Qi Rong got locked up in the palace by the king,” Feng Xin said. “He’s always so showy, so of course he was an easy target. But he knew to come find us as soon as he got back, so at least his head’s clear enough for that.”

It seemed that as much as Qi Rong despised his two attendants, he still acknowledged how competent they were. The two had planned to have one stay behind to guard the city, but Qi Rong was screaming and howling and clutching a sword smeared in Xie Lian’s blood, so they thought the danger might be greater than they expected and decided to come together. Beizi Hill was thick with the air of evil, so it wasn’t hard to pinpoint their location and make their way there quickly.

Although Xie Lian possessed an ascended body—normal blades could not hurt his cultivation foundation, and a jab like this wouldn’t kill him—he had still never truly lost in a battle of life and death in his twenty years. This was the very first time he’d been so badly wounded, and he’d need time to recover. So Feng Xin carried him on his back on their return to the imperial capital. An excruciating, foreign pain from his stomach stabbed at him in waves, and Xie Lian furrowed his brow as he tried to restrain himself.

“Did you two run into anything on your way here?”

“No,” Mu Qing replied.

Xie Lian sucked in a breath and said, “Be careful, there are inhuman creatures about…”

He had wanted to tell them about that white-clothed creature, but he was thoroughly exhausted. From the corner of his eye, he could see the young soldier following behind with that bloody iron sword still in hand, and the sight finally allowed him to relax. He closed his eyes and fell deeply asleep to restore his energy.

He had capriciously descended into the Mortal Realm over two months ago, and ever since, Xie Lian had not once closed his eyes to rest.

With the pressure on him building up day after day, this whole ordeal had finally crushed him. He was comatose for three full days.

On the third day, he woke up with a start and found himself staring at a glamorous, beautiful ceiling. He was in the palace, inside his bedchamber. He immediately sat up.

“Feng Xin!”

Feng Xin was just outside testing his bow, and he entered when he heard the call.

“Your Highness!”

Xie Lian’s stomach injury had long since healed, and he immediately rolled out of bed. “Was I out for a long time? Did anything happen?”

“Relax,” Feng Xin said. “It was only a few days. There were no enemy attacks. If there had been, wouldn’t I have woken you up? Go back to bed—you forgot your shoes again.”

Finally reassured, Xie Lian sat back down on the bed. After a pause, he asked, “Where’s Mu Qing?”

Just then, Mu Qing walked in too, with a set of prepared robes in his hands. “Here.”

He attended to dressing the crown prince. Feng Xin spoke up beside them.

“Even though there hasn’t been a battle in the past few days, we did find something out.”

“Which is?” Xie Lian asked.

“Didn’t we say before that something’s off with Yong’an? That they might have gotten reinforcements somehow?” Feng Xin began. “We went to scout Beizi Hill and saw several people that were dressed like our citizens but who had strange accents. They didn’t seem like they were from Xianle. I captured them, and sure enough, there are other kingdoms supporting them from the shadows, secretly shipping them supplies and arms.”

With so many people of Yong’an crammed on that wild, mountainous hill, there was no way they’d survived all this time on wild roots and weeds!

Feng Xin cussed. “Fucking fakers. Pretending to be all friendly and then rubbing elbows with the enemy at a time like this—they’re just happy for the chance to throw Xianle into complete chaos!”

The Kingdom of Xianle possessed a vast territory with bountiful resources; its wealth was abundant, its production of precious jewels plentiful. Nearby kingdoms had long watched them with envious eyes. Xie Lian had expected this and shook his head gravely.

He recalled something else and asked, “Where’s that boy?”

“Which one?” Feng Xin asked. “Oh, the little soldier? We were busy rushing you to the state preceptor that day, so no one paid him any mind. He probably went back to his troop.”

Now dressed, Xie Lian lowered his arms and sat down with poise on the bed. “That child was fairly skilled; I think he’s got a lot of potential with the saber. If he’s taught well, he’ll be spectacular when he’s older,” he said. “Mu Qing, remember to find him for me when you get a chance. Get him settled somehow—he could be appointed.”

Xie Lian loved talented martial artists. He always just *had* to appoint them to his side, so he could watch them every day and soak in delight. This wasn’t the first time he had made such comments, but it was the first time they were directed at a child. Mu Qing heard him make those compliments, “really good potential with the saber,” “spectacular when he’s older,” and his expression turned unreadable. He scrunched up the hair band he’d just untied from Xie Lian’s head, then turned around to throw it to the side.

Feng Xin, on the other hand, remarked, “That brat only looked about fourteen or fifteen. Isn’t that too young? What’s he gonna do after being appointed?”

In a flat voice, Mu Qing remarked upon the order as well, “I don’t think it’s proper. It’d be against military rules.”

“A god can descend into the Mortal Realm, so what can military rules do to me?” Xie Lian said, then continued his praise. “You two should’ve seen the way he killed those binu! His stance was so good!”

Speaking of binu, that strange, white-clothed creature flashed in his mind.

"Your Highness, why did yao like those Land of the Tenders appear on Beizi Hill?" Feng Xin asked. "That's never happened before."

Xie Lian rose to his feet. "That's what I wanted to tell you two that day."

Now that he finally had the time, he recounted his meeting with the one who wore the crying-smiling mask. The three of them talked it over, and for fear of dereliction of duty, they decided in the end that it was better to report it to the heavens. So Xie Lian left his bedchamber, met briefly with the king and queen, and hurried to the Palace of Divine Might on Mount Taicang.

In the past, Xie Lian would've gone straight to the Heavenly Capital directly to tell Jun Wu face-to-face. Yet the circumstances had changed—he deserted the Heavenly Capital of his own volition, so that would be like asking for the keys back. Even if he wanted to return now, the doors would be locked. Furthermore, he'd left in such an upset and spoken with such friction in the Palace of Divine Might that he was a little embarrassed to face Jun Wu. Thus, with great reverence, he paid his respects with a few giant sticks of incense in the Palace of Divine Might and passed on the message to the divine statue of the Heavenly Emperor. Once Jun Wu was available, he would hear it. However, Jun Wu regularly received thousands upon thousands of incense respects—an overwhelming amount—with those of grand believers mixed in. Whether he would hear this particular message would depend entirely on chance.

Xie Lian didn't dare stay absent for too long, so he immediately returned to the battlefront to continue his watch over the city.

Maybe it was because the damage inflicted in the first battle was too great and their reinforcements had frequently been cut off by Feng Xin and Mu Qing's covert sabotage, but Yong'an changed tactics; they didn't make another reckless charge. There were a few smaller battles over the next few months, but no grave losses. Compared to that first battle, those little bouts were nothing. That strange, white-clothed creature didn't appear again either. The tension in the imperial capital of Xianle dissipated with this relative peace.

Xie Lian also found a rare chance to leave the front lines, and he strolled through the capital to relax a bit. He stepped onto a small stone bridge, stirring the long, thin branches of the weeping willow next to the bridge as he did. He watched the lively red koi fish swish their tails, feeling envious at the sight of them swimming so happily through the coursing waters below. He had been lost in thought for a while when he suddenly felt eyes staring at him from behind. When he turned his head, however, there was no one there. Though puzzling, he didn't sense any malicious or killing intent, so Xie Lian paid it no mind.

After crossing the bridge, he strolled along the Grand Avenue of Divine Might, and passersby on the road bowed to him excitedly or reverently or joyfully, greeting him as "Your Highness." Xie Lian nodded and smiled, but after walking for a while, he felt that gaze on his back again.

This time, he did pay it mind and whipped around without warning to catch the culprit in the act. Beneath a willow tree, he saw the flash of a figure dodging behind the trunk. Xie Lian strode forward and was about to seize the person when he realized with a start that it was a boy with his head wrapped in bandages.

"You're…?"

Even with bandages wrapped all around his head, the boy still covered his face with his crossed arms, leaving only a bright eye peeking through his patched sleeves.

"Y-Your Highness, I didn't mean to…" he stammered.

Xie Lian pointed at him. "You're the one from that night…"

He trailed off as he recalled the exact details of what had transpired that night many months ago. Images filled his mind, and his face reddened at the memory and the extent of his discomposure. Feeling slightly awkward, he hurriedly cleared his throat.

"So it was you. I was going to look for you a while back, but with so much on my plate I'd forgotten. *Ahem*, aren't you a soldier in the army? Why are you in the city?"

The boy was taken aback. "I'm not in the army anymore," he replied, a little mopingly.

“Huh? Why not?” Xie Lian asked, bewildered.

The boy was even more bewildered. “I…got kicked out. Your Highness, did…did you not know?!”

Xie Lian was perplexed. “Know what?”

He had clearly told Mu Qing that this child was a good sprout and that he should be settled and appointed. So why was he kicked out of the army after Xie Lian’s specific directions?!

That boy looked both excited and happy, and he dropped his arms immediately. “So Your Highness didn’t know! I had thought… I thought…”

Xie Lian was getting more and more curious. “Come, tell me, why did you get kicked out? Who kicked you out? Why did you think I would know? Also, you thought what?”

The boy took a step toward him, but before he could speak, a loud, horrified scream rang out from the Grand Avenue of Divine Might.

“Aaaaaaaaaaah—!”

Xie Lian whipped his head around and saw a man running and stumbling in his direction, holding his face.

Chapter 38:
From the Earth of Buyou Forest, Human Face Disease Emerges

THE MAN WAS TALL AND BURLY, and many on the streets were sent tumbling and complained loudly as he hurtled past them in his crazed dash.

“What gives?!”

“It’s already such a hot day, why’s he running around so heated…?”

“Wow, it’s my first time seeing someone dashing past without putting their best face forward.”

Many started laughing as they commented, since they weren’t genuinely angry. But as that man blindly rampaged with his hands over his face, he collided head-on with a large, luxurious horse-drawn carriage, and blood splattered right there on the streets. He fell backward onto the ground in a heap, and the pedestrians who’d been joking around screamed at the sight.

The carriage’s owner was shocked as well, and he poked his head out to ask, “Who was that? Who crashed into me?”

Everything had happened so suddenly, Xie Lian had to put the matter with the boy on the backburner for now. He rushed over.

“What happened?”

The man who had rammed his head into the carriage seemed to have passed out, and his disheveled hair blocked his face. A small crowd had formed around him and was watching carefully.

Before Xie Lian got close, the man suddenly leapt up in a fit and wailed.

"I can't stand it anymoooooore! Someone! Someone kill me! Quick, someone come kill me! *Please!*"

A few of the burly men passing by couldn't watch anymore and commented, "Which household let their lunatic loose? Take him away, jeez…"

They walked up to arrest the man, but when they approached and saw his face up close, they all screamed and backed away in a hurry.

"What is this monster?!"

The madman chased after them, crying manically, "Beat me to death, *hurry*!"

The men were horrified. As Xie Lian approached and they recognized His Highness the Crown Prince, they rushed to hide behind him like he was a divine reprieve. Without so much as a blink, Xie Lian gave a swift but controlled kick to knock that madman down, and he was sent tumbling into the mud, filthy as a dog. Some pointed at him.

"Your Highness! This man…this man…he has…he has—!"

No need for them to point it out, Xie Lian saw it too—this man had two faces!

More precisely, it was one face with another sprouting from it. That second face was about the size of his palm, squished on half of the madman's cheek. Although the man was young, that small face was that of a wrinkly old man—and ugly to the core!

Xie Lian was also shocked to the core. His mind was filled with only one thought.

What is this monster?!

He immediately unsheathed the sword that hung at his waist—it was Hongjing, the enchanted sword gifted to him by the Heavenly Emperor. Ever since he first encountered that white-clothed creature, he had kept this sword on him at all times in case there was a need for it—just maybe, he'd get to see that creature's true form. But the sword was certainly useful for other circumstances as well.

Once unsheathed, the shine of that blade was brighter than snow, yet when he checked the reflection, it was no different from what he saw before him. It still showed this man, and it still showed both terrifying faces. That meant this madman was no monster or demon. He was human!

But was there really anyone in the world with such a horrifying appearance? If he was born this way, how was he unknown within the capital for so many years? Xie Lian was still bewildered when someone in the crowd suddenly spoke with a trembling voice.

"How…how did this happen to him?"

Xie Lian immediately sheathed Hongjing and turned to the man. "You know him? Was he not like this before?"

A number of people replied: "We know him! We work with him. Of course he wasn't like this. Before, his face… How could that happen to his face?!"

The onlooking crowd was growing bigger, almost to the point of blocking the whole main street. With a grave expression, Xie Lian took a deep breath and shouted loudly and clearly.

"Do not come any closer, everyone! There is nothing wrong, so break it up!"

The bandaged boy was helping him keep the crowd away, but Xie Lian didn't notice; he was too busy calling for Feng Xin and Mu Qing in the communication array.

"Come quickly to the capital's Grand Avenue of Divine Might!"

After lowering his hand, he saw another person close by who looked exceedingly hesitant, hemming and hawing. Xie Lian took a step toward him.

"Do you have something you want to say?"

With the crown prince's query, that man seemed to have found his courage. "Your Highness, there's something that I'm not sure I should tell you…"

Xie Lian had no time to listen to him dawdle and bluntly cut him off. "Get to the point!"

“A few days ago, some bumps appeared on my chest; three big ones and two small ones. I didn’t feel anything; they didn’t itch or hurt—they actually feel pretty good when you pick at ’em. I didn’t think much of them, but seeing this guy here, I’m feeling a little…got an itch or somethin’, ha ha.” He laughed flatly and untied his robe, showing his chest. “There’s nothing wrong with me…is there?”

The moment he took off his robe, everyone fell silent. It wasn’t just “some bumps” on that man’s chest. It was clearly a woman’s face, with all five of her features indistinct but intact!

That man looked down in shock. “When did it get like this?! It wasn’t that…that…”

Lifelike? Realistic? No matter what adjective was used, it was sheer horror!

Everyone around was terrified, and in spite of himself, that man grabbed onto the hem of Xie Lian’s robe and cried, “Your Highness, save me!”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing arrived at that point, having rushed over from the city towers after receiving his summons. At the sight before them, they both furrowed their brows.

“Stand back!” Feng Xin shouted. “What are you playing at?!”

Xie Lian didn’t have the time to explain. He patted the man’s shoulders and comforted him, “Do not worry. Stay calm.”

His tone of voice was warm and firm, serious but kind. The man thought Xie Lian had everything under control and believed without a doubt that a small matter like this was nothing to His Highness the Crown Prince, and so he relaxed. However, Xie Lian’s mind was in turmoil.

That “human face” was something that had grown gradually! And those symptoms—he would call them “symptoms” for now—were affecting more than one person. Dare he assume there were even more cases?

He immediately gave Feng Xin and Mu Qing a rough account. “Report this to the palace,” he commanded. “Pass down this order: Search the whole city and see if there is anyone else with similar affliction. Do not miss a single one!”

Because the matter was so shocking, once the king received the news, he made it a priority, dispatching a large number of men to search and investigate. They were highly efficient and effective, and by that night it was confirmed that there were already five people in the imperial capital with faintly visible faces growing on their bodies. Of those five, either they'd seen them but didn't pay them any mind, or the faces were growing in areas not easily detected. In addition, the faces didn't itch or hurt, so those affected didn't notice right away. Beyond that, there were over a dozen others who had shallow bumps growing on their bodies—no doubt the still-immature faces.

Women and youths made up the majority of this group of twenty-some people. Filled with clear unease as they were sent forth before Xie Lian, they greeted and comforted one another as they milled about. Initially, Xie Lian was speaking to someone on the side to address some business, but when he noticed this close camaraderie, he felt something was amiss.

"Do you all know each other?" he asked.

The officials running about had worked all night. They briefly glanced at their reports and replied, "Your Highness, many of them live on the outskirts of the capital, fairly close together. Maybe they've crossed paths as neighbors."

Many of the affected were from the same area? Mu Qing was shocked.

"The people growing those human faces all live close to one another? It's contagious?!"

Xie Lian had already arrived at the same conclusion, he just didn't announce it aloud so bluntly. Immediately, he commanded, "Isolate them! Disperse the non-affected, and do not let anyone come close to this place. Find a place to quarantine everyone here!"

"A strange, contagious disease." When those words leaked out, it was more effective than any order to disperse troops and strong-arm people away. Not only did the onlooking crowd scatter, more than half the houses on the street emptied out. Xie Lian ordered the officials and soldiers he had appointed to gear up for protection, and he brought those twenty-some people to the outskirts of the capital where some of them already lived.

Near the residential area on the outskirts, there was a large forest called Buyou. The government officials had intended to build a quarantine camp there to temporarily settle the sick. While others were busy building camp, Xie Lian and his two attendants entered the woods. As they walked, a sense of foreboding weighed heavier and heavier on Xie Lian's mind. Feng Xin and Mu Qing noticed as well, and it was Feng Xin who spoke up first.

"Your Highness, isn't this where Lang Ying…"

Xie Lian clasped his hands behind him, frowning deeply. "Yeah. It was here."

Buyou Forest was the very place that Lang Ying had dug a grave barehanded for his son's corpse!

Realizing this, the three exchanged looks of dismay. Although they couldn't put their fingers on it, a theory was forming in their minds, compelling them to start searching for the place where Lang Ying had buried the corpse that day. Yet, it had been months since then, and with so many trees in the Buyou Forest, how could they possibly remember the exact tree the child was buried under?

Right then, an indescribably foul stench wafted through the air.

That disgusting stink was like that of a rotten corpse, but even more suffocating—one breath of it could knock a man out. Others smelled it too and started backing away, covering and fanning at their noses.

"What's over there?"

"What's going on?! It stinks worse than a ten-year-old pickle jar!"

Xie Lian rushed forward and followed that frightful smell, and sure enough, he came to a familiar-looking crooked tree. The earth under the tree was slightly raised, forming a benign-seeming mound. The soldiers brandished their swords and gathered to protect Xie Lian, but he raised a hand to stop them.

"Be careful," he said gravely. "Ordinary people, stand back."

The not-ordinary Feng Xin retrieved a shovel and approached. After a few shovels, the muddy mound became a ditch, the foul stench grew thicker, and Feng Xin dug more cautiously. After another few shovels, a small black thing was dug out, and it seemed to be squirming.

Feng Xin slowed his movement, and the soldiers reacted as if they were facing a great enemy. Suddenly, the earth lurched up. A hugely swollen, bloated body broke out of the soil, exposing itself before the torch-holding crowd. That rotten, foul stench surged into the air, and a great number threw up on the spot. Xie Lian's pupils shrank.

That thing couldn't be described as "human" anymore. Anything else in the world was more human than it. No one would be able to tell that this gigantic corpse was once a tiny, emaciated child!

The urge to vomit rolled up to his throat, and Xie Lian looked away. Feng Xin and Mu Qing were dumbfounded too, and they called out in shock.

"What is that thing?!"

"Is that a curse or just a rotten corpse?!"

No matter what that thing was, Xie Lian knew what they needed to do.

"Stand back! The further the better! I'm going to burn it!"

He raised his hand, and a stream of flames leapt forth. As the fire blazed and filled the air with thick smoke, the sharp sound of a battle horn sounded from the distant imperial capital, loud and shrill, calling all to attention.

The three looked up at the same time—that was the signal for an enemy attack. Feng Xin cussed.

"Fuck! Of all times, they had to come now!"

Mu Qing's face was dark, and his expression was unreadable under the firelight. "Maybe this is intentional?"

Xie Lian made the call. "Mu Qing, you stay here and take care of this. Feng Xin, you come with me. We'll repel them first. Remember, do not let them notice any weaknesses!"

It was nighttime. The two of them rushed out of the city in a hurry, and they fought a battle in a hurry. Although the fight came suddenly, they still won. But even though they won, none of the Xianle soldiers felt the joy of victory—Xie Lian himself included.

The strange disease that had appeared so suddenly came to be called “Human Face Disease” by the people. Word of it spread through the imperial capital fast as lightning, causing uproar and great unease.

The king considered suppressing the news, but the first victim had rampaged in the streets before countless witnesses, so from the very start this wasn’t something that could be kept under wraps. Besides, the Human Face Disease was spreading rapidly: in a matter of six days, over fifty more people found that similar lesions had begun to appear on their bodies.

At the same time, the Yong’an sieges were growing more frequent. Attacked from both sides, Xie Lian could barely find the time to go to Yong’an and create rain. All the spiritual power and energy he allotted for the task was instead spent at the quarantine camp in the capital outskirts.

Within chilly Buyou Forest sprawled a large number of simple tents and huts. Xie Lian crossed over a ground packed with patients. This quarantine had started with twenty-some people but soon ballooned into hundreds—and the number was growing. Every day, if he had time, Xie Lian would come and use his power to relieve the horrifying symptoms of those afflicted. However, he still couldn’t cure the root cause, and what the people truly hoped for was for him to heal them completely.

As Xie Lian walked through the camp, a young man lying on the ground suddenly reached out and tugged at the hem of his robe.

“Your Highness, I won’t die, will I?”

Xie Lian was about to respond, but he noticed that this young man looked familiar. Upon a closer look, wasn’t he the passerby who gave him an umbrella on that fateful rainy day when he learned that Xianle was short on water?

In recalling that day, that rain, that umbrella, warmth filled Xie Lian’s heart. He knelt down and gently patted the back of the man’s hand.

“I will do my best,” he told him earnestly.

It was as if the man had received the hope to live, and his eyes twinkled with joy—he repeated “Good, good” as he lay down once more.

From the fervent eyes of the sick all around him, Xie Lian could tell they genuinely believed he would save them. And so every time he met those eyes, guilt sprouted deep in his heart, and he grew ever more desperate for a cure.

After making a round of the quarantine camp, Xie Lian found a place to sit. Mu Qing started a campfire, while Xie Lian himself was lost in thought. Some distance away, a few errand runners walked off carrying a stretcher, whispering quietly to each other, yet somehow their words had reached Xie Lian's ears.

"How many is this now?"

"The fourth or fifth, I think."

On the stretcher was a patient who died in Buyou Forest. It was actually difficult to die from Human Face Disease, but that fact made it even more frightening. Without the release of death, it meant that those things would stay on the victims' bodies for the rest of their lives. The thought of it alone could make one lose the will to live. Especially young women—they cared for their appearance, so if something like that grew somewhere important like their face, most would choose to simply end their own lives.

Another sighed. "When will this end?"

Another said, "We have His Highness the Crown Prince—we won't lose. Just relax."

The first one could not help but make a small complaint. "I'm not afraid of losing battles. But with the situation like this, does it matter if we don't lose? It still doesn't make life easier for us civilians," he sighed. "Never mind…never mind. I'm not complaining, here. Just pretend I said nothing. I said nothing."

If Feng Xin were there, he would've immediately rushed up to cuss them out. Mu Qing, however, simply gave Xie Lian a look and continued to build the fire without saying a word. Only when those two were completely gone did he comment expressionlessly.

"Ignorant commoners only know how to blame others and the heavens. Do they think a martial god has control over everything?"

Xie Lian shook his head. What that man had said held a certain logic. He was a martial god; when he was part of an army, there would be no battles unwon. Yet, at times like these, what use was it to win battles? An army was meant to protect civilians from attack. But if the civilians were being attacked by a plague, didn't that make this advantage nothing but a cruel joke?

Just then, the campfire flickered, and another sat down next to Xie Lian. It was Feng Xin, who had returned.

"How is it?" Xie Lian asked immediately.

Feng Xin shook his head. "It was exactly the same as when you searched. There's no trace of Lang Ying on Beizi Hill and nothing of that strange, white-clothed character either. Who knows where they're hiding? And there's no way of confirming that they're even the ones behind this. Also, the Yong'an people were all fine, like we suspected; not a single case of Human Face Disease."

Mu Qing poked at the fire. "The imperial capital and Beizi Hill are so close to one another, there's no way no one was infected. It's obvious that they must be the ones behind all this."

Many were secretly convinced, and it made sense to think that way. But even if they accused Lang Ying of foul play, whether secretly or openly, the man was hidden well away, and they couldn't find any proof.

They suspected that Human Face Disease was born from a curse, and that the source of said curse was the corpse of Lang Ying's son. If it was a curse, then it was a good one—it didn't leave any traces for them to investigate, so there was no evidence to confirm their suspicions. And who knew, maybe this Human Face Disease truly was a new, naturally formed plague? There was no way Xie Lian could draw any conclusions about what the disease actually was unless they apprehended their suspect.

He had rushed to give the Upper Court a report of his theories, yet as mentioned, Xie Lian's descent was a transgression, and things between him and heaven had changed. In the past, if he had wanted to report something, he could simply barge into the Palace of Divine Might and scream it directly into Jun Wu's ear. Now, he had to do it by the books. To explain what that meant: If he was lucky, he could pass his word through to the heavenly officials simply by throwing out hefty sums of merits. If he was unlucky, he might be forced to go through complicated red tape and be tied up by endless delays. And even after all that, it'd still only be some other heavenly officials sent forth. Xie Lian himself was a heavenly official, and other than Jun Wu, there were very few who could match him in power, so the other heavenly officials might not even be effective. Jun Wu carried a heavy burden; he attended to a myriad of affairs every day, so there was no way he could come to Xie Lian's aid in person. Thus, Xie Lian's reporting was only for show, and he didn't expect anything to come of it.

Moreover, none of that truly consumed Xie Lian's thoughts. They were consumed by another problem.

He spoke those thoughts aloud. "If we assume that Yong'an used a curse for the sake of defeating the imperial capital, it would've been the most effective to direct the attack at the army. Wouldn't that be the same as opening the gates once the army falls?"

It wasn't that there were no victims of the Human Face Disease in the army, but compared to civilians, there were very few—only three or four examples to be had. Once they had been sent to quarantine, the situation was immediately under control, and nothing spread to the other soldiers.

Feng Xin always spoke his mind whenever a thought arose, so he said, "Maybe they think even if they defeat the army, with you around they'd still lose—so they gave up on that and targeted civilians directly?"

Mu Qing chuckled dryly at this. Feng Xin immediately reacted.

"What are you laughing about?"

"Nothing. You always manage to bring up good points. I have nothing to say," Mu Qing replied.

What annoyed Feng Xin the most was people who pretended to act courteously but whose real intention was to snipe at others. Thus, Feng Xin ignored Mu Qing completely.

"If it really was them, then I'll lose respect for them. Fight honestly on the battlefield if you have the ability; don't use shady tricks to harm innocent civilians!"

Xie Lian wholeheartedly agreed, and he sighed. "I've been thinking these past few days about what exactly causes the infection. We have to know the cause before we can control the disease itself.”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Feng Xin said. “Infection comes from close contact. Touching, drinking the same water, eating together, sleeping together, or whatever.”

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead. “On the surface, that’s not wrong. But take the army for example. The soldiers all drink, eat, and sleep together, and are in closer quarters than most ordinary households. So why aren’t more soldiers infected?”

Mu Qing furrowed his brow. “So what you mean is, even under the same circumstances, with different physiques, some will be infected and others not. You want to find out just what kind of people are immune to Human Face Disease, right?”

Xie Lian raised his head. “Mu Qing, you understand me. That’s exactly it. If we can find that out, there might be a way to stop Human Face Disease from spreading.”

Mu Qing nodded. “Good. Then, let’s look at it this way: What kind of people are more likely to get infected? What type of patients dominate the quarantine of Buyou Forest?”

Xie Lian had walked through the camps countless times these past few days and could answer with his eyes closed. He listed them off immediately, “Women, children, teens, seniors, and young men who are smaller in build.”

“So only the weak are infected?” Feng Xin wondered doubtfully. “Should we have the king order for everyone in the capital to work out and strengthen their bodies?”

“…”

“…”

Xie Lian and Mu Qing both gave him a look, not wanting to respond.

After a pause, Feng Xin himself added, “Wait, that’s not right.”

Obviously not—the first victim that rampaged on the Grand Avenue of Divine Might was a strong, healthy man, so the theory didn’t hold up.

Just how were the soldiers that had become infected with Human Face Disease different from other soldiers? Xie Lian thought of many possibilities and tried testing his hypotheses. But no matter from which angle he looked, there wasn’t anything obvious that differentiated them from the rest. The characteristics of the infected victims were all across the board—their looks, their physiques, their social statuses, their temperaments. It was impossible to draw a conclusion based on these criteria. Could the infection really just be a matter of chance?

“What exactly did the soldiers do to stop the spread of Human Face Disease?” Xie Lian mumbled to himself. “In other words, what have they done more often than civilians…”

When he came to this thought, his eyes suddenly widened, and his face paled.

At his abrupt halt, Feng Xin asked, “What’s wrong, Your Highness? Have you thought of something?”

Xie Lian had indeed thought of something. He had come to a logical conclusion, but at the same time, it was a terrifying one.

“Impossible!” he blurted, jumping to his feet. “No, no, it shouldn’t be like this. That’s absurd.”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing immediately rose too. “What is it?”

Xie Lian held his forehead and paced back and forth, raising his hand. “Hold on. I…have a ridiculous guess. It shouldn’t be true, but I need to test it out.”

“What guess, exactly?” Mu Qing asked. “How will you test it? Do you need me to find you someone?”

Xie Lian immediately rejected the idea. “No. We can’t use a live person for testing. What if I’m wrong?”

He hoped he was wrong; even better if he was way off the mark. Mu Qing frowned.

“Your Highness, if you need to ascertain whether you’re right or wrong, you’ll need a live person for testing. That’s the best way. Just standing here brooding won’t do any good.”

Feng Xin frowned too. “Can’t you see he’s troubled? Stop saying such things at a time like this.”

Mu Qing turned to him. “Weird. What exactly did I say? Didn’t I speak the truth? At this point, what’s the use in being indecisive and hesitating?”

Feng Xin was repulsed. “Do you have to judge everything based on how useful it is? We’re talking about a live person here. Not even a bit of hesitation; aren’t you a little too collected?”

“Collected?” Mu Qing countered. “You actually want to say ‘cold-blooded,’ right?”

Xie Lian didn’t have the patience to defuse the fight between the two like he usually did and scolded them, “The two of you can start an argument over a single word! What a disgrace. Stand here for one incense time. No one’s allowed to move within that time. Same old rules.”

“…”

“…”

Hearing the words “same old rules” had Feng Xin and Mu Qing’s faces changing color.

Xie Lian waved his hand. “Heaven Official’s Blessings. Start.”

A moment later, Feng Xin said through gritted teeth, “Blessings shine from up high…”

Mu Qing gritted his teeth too. “High imitation, no thought…”

Feng Xin was in trouble. “Thought… Thought…”

He was deep in arduous thought trying to come up with a way to continue. Xie Lian turned to enter Buyou Forest to find the three soldiers who were infected for questioning.

Regarding the “same old rules,” this was a method Xie Lian had come up with to distract his companions. Feng Xin and Mu Qing would snipe at each other every chance they got, starting petty disputes from nothing at all. At first, Xie Lian would make them stand in silence for one incense time without speaking to each other until they calmed down, but this tactic wasn’t very effective. It was then that Xie Lian decided to try idiom training. Tempted with a chance to have an objective winner and loser, they'd lose all sight of their original conflict and would instead focus on crushing the other in training idioms. The world became decidedly more peaceful after Xie Lian discovered this effective method, and he was quite pleased.

Forcing them to train idioms now was also an attempt to make everyone ease up a little, and yet this ease didn't last long. After one incense time, Xie Lian returned. His face was extremely grim when he gave his instructions.

"Bring me all the soldiers who lived in the same quarters as the infected. I need to question them."

The two of them had each been stuck down during several of their own turns and had also each seized their own little victories, so upon being released from training idioms, they both sighed in relief.

"We will," Mu Qing said, "but your findings might not be accurate if you use such a roundabout method to gather evidence."

Feng Xin had already turned to heed his orders. Xie Lian called him back.

"Wait! It's already deep into the night. Questioning them now would cause too much of a stir, and we can't call forth too many at a time either—it'd be too conspicuous. The things I want to ask must not be made known or allowed to leak. If you go now, we won't be able to conceal anything."

Feng Xin turned his head. "Then what should I do? Bring them to you one by one to have you interrogate them privately?"

"There's no other way," Xie Lian said. "Tomorrow, bring the soldiers who are close to the victims to my chambers one by one, and don't let them know that others have been questioned. Remember to order them not to tell anyone, otherwise…"

He breathed deeply and sighed.

"Never mind, just threaten them. Just say if word gets out, they shall be executed without mercy. The harsher the better."

"Questioning them one by one…how long will that even take?" Mu Qing commented.

"It doesn't matter how long it takes," Xie Lian stated. "The more I ask, the more sure I'll be. I…absolutely need to get to the bottom of this. There can't be any confusion."

Thus, the next day, Xie Lian sat in the chamber that had been temporarily assigned to him atop the towers and personally interrogated over three hundred soldiers. As for the questions he posed, all three hundred of them gave the same answers. With every soldier questioned, Xie Lian's face grew a shade darker.

When that was done and Feng Xin and Mu Qing entered the room, they saw Xie Lian sitting by the table, forehead propped up on his hand, unspeaking. It was a while before he slowly began to speak.

"You two stay and guard the city gates. I'm going to make a trip to Mount Taicang."

Feng Xin hesitantly asked, "Your Highness, did you find something out from the interrogations? Is it a curse, or…?"

Xie Lian nodded. "That much has become clear. It's a curse."

Mu Qing was solemn. "You're certain?"

"Without a doubt," Xie Lian said. "I also found out what kind of people are infected, and what kind aren't."

Despite his declaration, there was not a trace of joy on his face from solving the mystery. Feng Xin and Mu Qing felt things might not be that simple, but if Xie Lian didn't take the initiative to tell them, then as his subordinates it wasn't their place to ask. Their hearts silently sank.

At Mount Taicang, the Royal Holy Temple—the highest peak, the Palace of Divine Might.

The state preceptor was paying his respects within the soft curling clouds of incense smoke. Xie Lian crossed the threshold of the hall and immediately cut straight to the point.

"State Preceptor, I need to see the Heavenly Emperor."

The state preceptor finished paying his respects and turned his head. "Your Highness, the gates of the Heavenly Realm no longer open to you."

“I know,” Xie Lian said. “But right now, I have ascertained that the Kingdom of Xianle is currently under attack by a malicious curse that has never been seen before. This is not a natural disaster, it is the work of inhuman creatures. Please help me; request that the Heavenly Emperor descend and possess your body so I can report this information to him directly. Maybe he will know the source of this and help find a solution.”

Since his return to the Mortal Realm, he had reported to the Palace of Divine Might three times. The first two times weren’t sincere; they were only done out of habitual courtesy. This time, he was genuinely seeking help.

The state preceptor sat down on a chair. “It’s not that I don’t want to help you, Your Highness, but there’s no longer a need for it,” he said. “Even if I give you a hand now, and have the Heavenly Emperor descend and possess my body, the answer you will receive from him will only disappoint you.”

Xie Lian’s expression dropped slightly. “Do you know something? Do you know what that white-clothed creature wearing the crying-smiling mask truly is?”

“Your Highness, do you still remember what I told you?” the state preceptor asked. “In this world, fortune—good or bad—is predetermined.”

Xie Lian was taken aback and didn’t respond.

“Originally, many of those from Yong’an were destined to die,” the state preceptor continued. “But you transferred water, created rain, and gave them a breath of relief. Yet you cannot save them completely from the drought, cannot settle their futures; so now, they are in the Yong’an army upon Beizi Hill, fighting for that future.

“Originally, the imperial capital was destined to decline. But then you personally descended and used your own powers to turn things around and gave the imperial capital a breath of relief. Yet you didn’t steel your heart to annihilate the Yong’an rebel army and root them out. Instead, you allowed them to survive until now, and like cockroaches, they only grow stronger with each battle.

“Your Highness, may I ask what you’re hoping to accomplish?” the state preceptor asked him in wonder. “Are you perhaps waiting for both sides to realize their mistakes? To repent and be born anew? To reunite as one country once more?”

An odd sense of shame budded within Xie Lian’s heart, yet it soon turned into confusion as he thought, *That’s strange. I saved people and protected people because they were innocent and didn’t deserve death. Everything I’ve done was only done after serious consideration, and every choice was made after much struggle. Yet why does it all sound so laughable coming from another’s mouth? Why does it sound like I’ve achieved nothing, that everything I’ve done is such a…failure?*

That word appeared in his mind, but he immediately blocked it out.

“You used your divinity to interfere in mortal matters,” the state preceptor added. “You’ve completely upended the predetermined fate of the Kingdom of Xianle—made a complete and utter mess. For the sake of balance, nature will breed things to bring everything you’ve derailed back on track. I don’t know what that creature is, but I am certain it was born because of you.”

“…” Xie Lian’s poise faltered.

The state preceptor continued, “I am also certain that, should the Heavenly Emperor see you, he will tell you the same thing—because this was the reason he didn’t want you to descend in the first place. But I feel that even if he’d told you then, you would’ve most likely come down anyway. Young people are like this, unheeding of advice. They won’t believe they can’t walk until they’ve fallen.”

“You’re saying that I’m the cause of Human Face Disease?!” Xie Lian was in disbelief. “By that logic, with this so-called predetermined fate, everything that uncrying, unlaughing creature does is my fault? So, the Upper Court won’t even bother with this?”

“You can think of it that way,” the state preceptor acknowledged, “but that’s not altogether correct either. If you must track things to their origin, you could also blame your father and your mother—if they didn’t give birth to you, then you wouldn’t have ascended, and therefore you wouldn’t have descended. By that reasoning, you could blame your entire Xianle ancestry. Assigning fault is meaningless.

“As for your last question—that’s right, they won’t. Because the Kingdom of Xianle was destined to fall. Since you reached out your hand and flipped the board, there will surely be another hand to set right all the game’s upset pieces.”

Xie Lian drew in a deep breath, not wanting to discuss whether the Kingdom of Xianle was destined to fall. He closed his eyes for a minute, then asked, “So answer me, State Preceptor. If I disappear now, will that creature also disappear?”

“I’m afraid not,” the state preceptor replied. “Easy to come, hard to go. Whether it’s a god, ghost, or demon, it’s all the same.”

Xie Lian nodded. “Fine,” he said rigidly. “Thank you, State Preceptor, for your guidance.”

Xie Lian knew any more talk would be pointless. The only one he could rely on to keep fighting was himself. He bowed to the state preceptor, bidding him farewell, and prepared to leave.

Behind him, the state preceptor called out. “Your Highness! How do you plan on walking your path from now on?”

Xie Lian had his head down. “Since my disappearance would change nothing, I will fight to the end. That is my only path.”

After a pause, he raised his head high and clearly enunciated every word.

“Be it a hand or something else, I don’t care—the people I protect will never become its pawn.”

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Two weeks later, Lang Ying led the Yong’an army in another attack.

After months of countless battles big and small, the Yong’an troops could now finally be called an army. They were no longer refugee brigands but a proper army with considerable strength!

It was as if Lang Ying had evaporated from the Mortal Realm for a long time—and having waited for so long, when Xie Lian saw this man again on the battlefield, he didn't waste a moment. He dashed straight past the troops to face him, swinging down with his sword as he shouted.

"Where's that white-clothed man?!"

Lang Ying blocked his attack and didn't answer, fighting back seriously. Xie Lian pressed him with each move he made.

"You know who I'm talking about. My patience is limited!"

Unexpectedly, Lang Ying stared at him and asked, "Your Highness, didn't you say it would continue to rain in Yong'an?"

Xie Lian hadn't expected him to ask that question. Startled, the words got stuck in his throat.

"I…"

He did indeed promise Lang Ying that Yong'an would have rain. However, in recent days, the number infected by the Human Face Disease within the capital had increased exponentially; at this point there were almost five hundred. Those five hundred victims couldn't all be settled in Buyou Forest, as the quarantine camp was running out of space. The government officials were debating a move to a bigger place, farther away. Most of Xie Lian's power was being used to relieve the symptoms of those five hundred people, and he had nothing left to create rain in Yong'an. Since he couldn't make use of the Rain Master's Hat, he felt bad keeping someone else's spiritual device; with no other options, he sent Feng Xin to the Kingdom of Yushi to return it and give his thanks.

Xie Lian struck again, yelling angrily, "I created that rain! Don't you have any clue why it's stopped?!"

The angrier he was, the calmer Lang Ying became. "That has nothing to do with me. I only know that, even without Human Face Disease, your powers won't last for long; just like how even with your rain, not many will survive in Yong'an. It's all pointless. Your Highness, why do you think you can achieve anything you want to do? Rather than putting my fate in your hands, I choose to put it in my own."

Something from that speech provoked Xie Lian, and his intent to kill flared.

His blade turned slightly, and he raised his left palm. A voice screamed inside his head: *Kill this man, and the remnants of the Yong'an army will be nothing to be afraid of!*

Throughout all their past meetings, this was the very first time Xie Lian had steeled his heart to kill Lang Ying. When he delivered a blow from his palm to Lang Ying's chest, the man spat blood from the strike, but the concussive blast did not penetrate his heart—instead, it was repelled by a shock wave.

Stricken with that shock, Xie Lian couldn't believe it. He backed away a few steps. "You?!"

Xie Lian knew very well what had shocked him back.

When those who were destined for greatness in the Mortal Realm—kings, geniuses, and heroes of chivalry—encountered a dire situation, their bodies would naturally radiate a protective aura to shield them from harm. Most of them had the potential for ascension. Lang Ying was no more than a boor, yet he radiated that protective spiritual aura, and it was even an exceedingly rare one—the aura of a king!

Xie Lian didn't dare to think deeply about what that meant, and he suddenly felt his heart go cold. The chill was from Lang Ying's sword, which had impaled him through the chest.

In that battle, there was no victory or defeat on either side.

Many still perished on Yong'an's side, but this time, Xianle didn't fare any better. If it were anyone else, they could say it was a hard-won battle, but to Xie Lian this was definitely defeat.

It was the first time he had been at a disadvantage, and although Lang Ying was still no match for Xie Lian and retreated with injuries in the end, many witnessed Lang Ying stabbing him. Xie Lian could guess that many soldiers were now talking behind his back—"His Highness is a martial god, how could he be stabbed? Aren't we the army of god? Why wasn't this another overwhelming victory?" However, Xie Lian had absolutely no time for such insignificant noise—Mu Qing had informed him that today, another hundred-some Human Face Disease patients had been sent to Buyou Forest.

One short day, and over a hundred!

The condition of the first group of Human Face Disease victims had worsened severely. There was not a single spot on their bodies that wasn't affected, and they had to be covered in thick white sheets lest they scare people. However, even through the covers, the contour of those bumps could still be seen.

Xie Lian moved through the camp to help alleviate symptoms, and when he finally finished one round, Feng Xin pulled him aside.

"Your Highness, what happened on the battlefield today?" he asked in a low voice. "How could you get stabbed by that boor? You struck him so many times—why didn't you just kill him?"

Xie Lian didn't want to tell him that there was now a king's aura on Lang Ying that not even heavenly officials could touch, so he only smiled wryly in response. It wasn't that he didn't want to kill him, it was that he could no longer kill him. All the spiritual power in his attacks was dissolved by that king's aura, and nothing worked against Lang Ying. When he realized this, he instantly switched to using his fists, but that Lang Ying was thick-skinned and could withstand quite the beating!

Just then, someone wailed from a distance away.

"Your Highness, *save me*!"

Xie Lian had accepted a bowl of water that Feng Xin passed to him, and that wail came just as he was taking his first sip. Xie Lian choked and didn't have the time to stop coughing before he rushed over. The one who had wailed was the young man who had given him that umbrella, and because Xie Lian was particularly gentle toward him, his cries for help were also particularly frequent. At first, the only part of this man that had grown a face was his knee; Xie Lian had used his power to stop the disease from spreading, so only his left leg had grown a face, nowhere else. But right now, he was madly kicking that leg and writhing.

Xie Lian held him down and comforted, "Don't move. I'm here!"

The young man was terrified to the core and grabbed on to him. "Your Highness! Your Highness, save me! I felt an itch on my leg just now, like some weed was scratching me, but when I—when I looked down, I saw those things…their mouths were opening and closing—moving, they're moving! They're eating grass! They're *alive*!"

The hair on Xie Lian’s neck raised instantly. He looked down, and sure enough, there were over a dozen faces tightly pressed together on the man’s left leg. Many of the mouths were stuffed with grass—chewing, gnawing, as if they were starving!

Many of the patients started screaming, and the crowd exploded in uproar. Feng Xin and the soldiers had to use force to subjugate them and prevent a riot.

Xie Lian used a hand to hold the young man down and turned to someone beside him to ask, “Does his leg still work?”

All the nursing staff at Buyou Forest wore full quarantine gear; they wrapped their whole bodies tightly in bandages and capes, making their faces unrecognizable in the process. One of the nurses answered him; his voice sounded like a boy’s.

“No, Your Highness! His leg is already forfeit. We don’t know what else is festering in there; the leg is heavy as a block of lead, and we could hardly move it. The infection is also climbing. Soon it’ll progress beyond the leg and reach his waist.”

Xie Lian had done his utmost to use his powers to heal these people, yet the young man’s leg had lost almost all normal function and was so obviously beyond saving.

“Your Highness,” one of the doctors whispered, “in my opinion, the only thing we haven’t tried is cutting off the part with the faces. That might slow the spread…”

That was also the only solution Xie Lian could think of. “Then cut it off!”

“No!” the young man immediately cried. He was terrified of having his limb amputated, but at the same time he didn’t dare hug his deformed leg, and he wept in pain. “My leg is not forfeit! Maybe it’ll get better… Your Highness! Don’t…don’t you have any other way to save me?!”

Xie Lian didn’t want to answer with *“I’ll do my best,”* or *“I’ll try,”* anymore. His sight was going dark, and he replied, “I’m sorry. I don’t.”

It was the first time His Highness the Crown Prince had said such a thing, and it shocked everyone present. There were some who lost it right then and there and started screaming.

“No?! You’re His Highness, you’re a god, how could you not have another way?! We’ve been waiting for you to come up with something for days, how could you have *nothing*?!”

The one who spoke was immediately silenced as they were shoved down by someone, but it wasn’t Feng Xin or Mu Qing. Mu Qing was silent and frowning, seeming like he thought Xie Lian’s answer was too blunt and didn’t comfort the crowd. Feng Xin, on the other hand, was further away, barking at some particularly rowdy patients. Xie Lian was battered and exhausted as of late, his unsheathed sword always hanging from his waist. When the blade came close to that grotesque leg, one of the faces felt the chill of the blade and suddenly stopped chewing. It opened its mouth and let out a shrill scream.

That thing actually screamed!

Although the sound was faint, it clearly came from the leg. The young man screamed as well, almost fainting from fright, and he clung onto Xie Lian as he sobbed.

“Your Highness, save me! *Save me!*”

Right then, three shallow sores opened on his waist, close to his thigh.

“Your Highness, it’s spreading! It’s spreading!” the doctor shouted in alarm. “The infection is spreading from his leg!”

No matter how much spiritual power was spent, Xie Lian still could not control the young man’s condition in the end. Those horrifying things were about to spread over his entire body—once that happened, there would be no going back. Could they really do nothing but sit back and watch?

Xie Lian gritted his teeth. “Let me ask you one thing. Do you want this leg, or not? I cannot guarantee what will happen once it is gone. If you do not want it, nod and we will operate immediately; if you want it, then do not nod, and we will figure something out!”

That young man was breathing heavily, his eyes blank from terror, his mind lost; it was like he was nodding but also shaking his head. The faces on his left leg started screaming one by one, as if welcoming their new companions. In between all the shrieks of *“Yeee!”* and *“Aaaaah!”* the delight on their faces was apparent, and their little red tongues were quivering. It was hard to imagine what the insides of that young man’s left leg looked like, just what it harbored within.

This couldn’t be delayed any further. Xie Lian instructed the doctor:

“Cut it off.”

That doctor, however, waved his hand rapidly. “Your Highness, forgive me! I’m not very sure either, and I don’t dare operate in a place like this. If amputation doesn’t guarantee anything, then we shouldn’t take this risk!”

The doctor cursed himself for speaking up; the nail that stuck out got hammered down, and what was he doing fighting for such a frightful job? He escaped back into the crowd and stopped talking.

The young man was mumbling over and over, “Your Highness, save me…Your Highness, save me!”

Yet Xie Lian’s mind was completely blank, and a hopeless voice mumbled inside him: *Who can come save* me*…?!*

There was chaos all around, screams and cries everywhere. Those twisted little human faces squished below were wailing as well, and in that moment, Xie Lian thought he saw hell.

It was like he was staring at hell without really seeing it. With cold sweat rolling, he widened his eyes, raised his arm—

The sword slashed down, and blood splattered.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaahhh—!”

The young man was only half-conscious at first, but he snapped awake and screamed wildly after Xie Lian cut his leg off.

“My leg! My *leg*!”

Xie Lian knelt in the pool of blood, doing his best to hold him down while his white robes were stained and mottled with red.

“It’s over! Doctors, stop his bleeding!”

The doctors present were flustered and forgot themselves. Mu Qing couldn’t watch any longer. He stepped forward.

"Stop losing your heads."

He took out a small medicine bottle, and from it flowed a faint smoke that slowly stopped the bleeding. Xie Lian also wrapped the wound with a layer of spiritual aura. As for that amputated leg, it lay on the ground all by itself. Suddenly, it quivered like a live creature, and it continued to squirm even severed from its body. Xie Lian raised his hand and a fire roared forth, torching the leg into nothing but black ash.

The young man wailed, "My leg!"

Xie Lian checked his waist and saw that Human Face Disease wasn't still festering. His eyes brightened, and he said delightedly, "It's good, it's stopped. It's not spreading!"

That young man finally stopped his tears and opened his eyes. "Really? Is it really better?"

The people all sucked in a breath. Then the crowd began to stir, and after a moment of hesitation, someone shouted.

"Your Highness, please treat me too!"

A boy's voice rang out from not far away. "Don't be so reckless! We can't be sure—what if he relapses?"

Thanks to that voice's reminder, Xie Lian calmed down too. "That's right, nothing is certain right now. We need some time to observe."

Another piped up, their voice trembling in fear. "How long do we need to observe…? I can't wait any longer. If we wait…if we keep waiting, this thing will spread to my face!"

Another just gave up altogether. "I'm willing to take the chance!"

Soon, the hundreds within the Buyou Forest grew unruly and noisy, all of them beseeching him, "Your Highness, please, we beg you! Relieve us of this suffering!"

The masses started prostrating toward him, worshipping Xie Lian at the center. Although he was in a difficult situation, Xie Lian didn't dare to be careless.

"Everyone, please get up first. If this man does not relapse after some time, I will do my utmost to treat everyone…"

It was a while before the people were comforted. After making many more promises and settling the young man with the amputated leg elsewhere, Xie Lian sat down under a tree. Mu Qing looked around before speaking in a low voice.

“How could you just chop off his leg? If the man himself didn’t beg you to do it, don’t just take the reins. What if it didn’t work even after you amputated? You’re the one he’d hate.”

Xie Lian’s heart was still racing. With a hand covering his face, he croaked, “It couldn’t wait. He wouldn’t answer me, and the doctor didn’t dare to operate—I couldn’t just stand by and watch the infection fester. Someone had to make a decision. I really…”

For once, Feng Xin looked worried. “Your Highness, I think you’d better take a rest. You really don’t look that good. We’ll take over for you for the time being.”

Xie Lian felt like he couldn’t hang on much longer. He nodded slowly. “All right. I’ll rest here for a bit. We’ll be heading back soon, so don’t go too far.”

There was another wail from within the forest, and Feng Xin and Mu Qing left to go check. Xie Lian sat there lost in a daze for a while, then lay down on the ground right there.

In the past, if no one was around to build him a perfumed tent with a tusk bed, he would never have just lay on muddy ground out in the wild. Under the current circumstances, however, he really didn’t have the energy to trouble any errand runners. He dropped his head and passed out, still dirty and unkempt, the grime and blood on his robes left uncleansed.

Xie Lian didn’t know how much time had passed. He woke from his haze with a start when he heard Feng Xin calling for him, and he sat up immediately. When he did so, he felt something slip off him, and he looked down to find a patched, worn blanket. Someone must’ve covered him with it when he was resting. Xie Lian rubbed his forehead and spoke to the approaching Feng Xin.

“I don’t need this. You can give it to the patients instead.”

Feng Xin was slightly taken aback. “Huh? What do you mean? This blanket? That’s not from me, I only just got back.”

Xie Lian turned his head. “Was it you, Mu Qing?”

“It wasn’t me either,” Mu Qing said. “Maybe it was one of the devotees living in the camp who brought it for you.”

Xie Lian looked around but didn’t see anyone worth noting. He shook his head, thinking, *I didn’t even sense anyone coming close. What a shameful state I’m in.*

He folded the blanket and laid it on the ground before rising to his feet. “Let’s go.”

Xie Lian left with a heavy heart, and very soon, the very thing he feared happened.

Two days later, Xie Lian visited Buyou Forest again, and some of the doctors informed him of the issue. Around a dozen Human Face Disease patients had ignored the warnings and snuck out at night to use fire and knives to burn and slice away their sores. Many of them mishandled the tools and lost too much blood, but they didn’t dare tell anyone. They hid under their blankets quietly and died equally silently.

Xie Lian had only just left the battlefield when he received the news. Standing before hundreds, watching those bloody, crying patients, he finally lost his temper.

“Why won’t any of you listen to reason?! Didn’t I say that we haven’t confirmed this method would cure the infection’s root cause?! How could you be so foolish?!”

It was the first time he had gotten so mad in front of so many devotees, and the masses bowed their heads silently, afraid to speak. Xie Lian was so furious that he couldn’t help but lecture a bit more, but as he berated them, someone spoke up unexpectedly.

“Your Highness is invincible, so of course you’d call us foolish. But aren’t our conditions so desperate that we had no choice but to try foolish methods?!”

Although this individual didn’t oppose him openly, his voice still dripped with sarcasm.

Blood rushed to Xie Lian’s head, and he snapped, “What did you say?”

That person immediately shrank back into the crowd and disappeared. Feng Xin was farther away and didn't hear, otherwise he would've cussed them out already. Mu Qing noticed that the mood of the crowd was going in the wrong direction and cautiously chose not to provoke any more outrage.

Seeing that Xie Lian didn't actually respond, another piped up.

"Your Highness, if you can't save us, then we gotta save ourselves. Don't worry, we won't waste your holy medicine or spiritual power."

It was hot blood that rushed up at first, but now Xie Lian felt immense cold.

What the heck? Did I ever say using my holy medicine or spiritual power was the problem? Clearly I only stopped them because amputation might not work—why do they have to say it like I'm arrogant and only making empty promises? I can't feel their pain, but if my desire to help them wasn't sincere, why in the world would I give up being a heavenly official and bring trouble upon myself down here?!

He'd never been stabbed by another's words before, and he'd never been wronged like this. Thousands of thoughts filled his mind, but none could be formed into words. He knew this was all because he couldn't find the cure for Human Face Disease, and his devotees were finally losing their patience. The suffering of these citizens was a hundred times worse than his own hardships. He could only clench his fists, cracking his knuckles. A moment later, he landed a sudden punch on a tree next to him.

The tree cracked and snapped, making the people jump and ending their whispers. Only then did Feng Xin notice something wrong and rush over.

"Your Highness!"

Landing that punch relieved Xie Lian's fury and let him calm down somewhat. Yet, in that dead silence, another person spoke up.

"Your Highness, there's no need for you to be so angry. Everyone here is a patient, and we're all your followers. No one owes you anything."

Once those words were spoken, many nodded to themselves. Although the voices were quiet, Xie Lian's senses were sharp, and he could hear every sound clearly. The crowd was grumbling.

“Finally, someone dared speak the truth. I’ve been holding it in, afraid to say anything…”

“Didn’t they always say His Highness the Crown Prince was a gentle soul? But I guess he’s different in person…”

In that endless wave of talk, Xie Lian unconsciously took a step back. In his twenty years, he had never been terrified before any enemy, he had never been afraid. Yet at that very moment, an emotion akin to terror swept through his heart. Just then, he heard another person whisper.

“With such impressive might, why not go set fire to the enemy camps, instead of making us suffer all these battles?!”

Hearing those words, he couldn’t stand there any longer.

Of course he knew that he was now nothing like that sword-bearing, flower-holding, smiling, kind martial god on the altar!

Xie Lian turned and ran, sprinting out of Buyou Forest like he was trying to escape. Behind him, Feng Xin and Mu Qing yelled.

“Your Highness! Where are you going?!”

There was suddenly a disturbance in the crowd; it seemed a young member of the nursing staff had suddenly started beating up patients out of the blue, and now others were joining in the brawl. Yet Feng Xin and Mu Qing had no time to worry about them anymore. They called forth troops to take care of the situation and immediately ran after Xie Lian.

His flight was taking him toward Beizi Hill. Every one of his steps carried him several dozen meters, and soon he came to the top of that densely wooded mountain. Xie Lian was seeing red, and he shouted into the forest.

“Come out!”

“Your Highness!” Feng Xin cried after him. “What are you doing, coming here?!”

Xie Lian yelled to the sky, “I know you’re here, so come the hell *out*!”

Mu Qing shouted, “If he came when you called, we wouldn’t need to…”

He trailed off and fell silent. Behind the three of them, something made scrunching sounds. Whipping their heads around, they saw sitting upon a vine watching them was none other than that white-clothed creature, the left side of his face crying, and the right smiling.

The creature had actually heeded his call!

Xie Lian immediately lost it at the sight of him. He lunged, crying sharply, “I’m going to kill you!”

That white-clothed creature lightly and nimbly evaded him. His large white sleeves were like the wings of a dancing butterfly, elegant and beautiful. Feng Xin and Mu Qing made a confused noise and moved to aid Xie Lian, but they abruptly noticed something extremely alarming and halted, looking dumbfounded.

Xie Lian, on the other hand, was filled with rage and noticed nothing.

He unsheathed his longsword just as Feng Xin shouted, “Your Highness! Don’t you see, he…”

Xie Lian’s hand was already around the neck of that white-clothed creature. The other hand held his sword pointed at the creature’s heart. The creature was clearly at his mercy, but suddenly it burst out laughing.

That laugh was sonorous and gentle, like the laughter of a young man; Xie Lian thought it sounded familiar, like someone he knew. But in his rage, he couldn’t think of who that voice belonged to, and that sliver of confusion didn’t last. Soon enough, the white-clothed creature sighed.

“Xie Lian, Xie Lian. It doesn’t matter how much you struggle. You’re going to lose. The Kingdom of Xianle is doomed!”

Xie Lian was furious and slapped him without waiting a beat. “Who do you think you are?! No one gave you the right to talk, so *shut up*!”

That was an exceedingly rude gesture for him. The head of that white-clothed creature was knocked askew from the force of the slap, but he righted it again.

“Do you really want me to shut up? All right, all right. But you know, there is a way for you to turn your defeat into victory. It just depends on your willingness to act."

If he hadn't added that last comment, Xie Lian would've ignored him. But with it, Xie Lian thought that, just maybe, there could be some truth to his words—that there was a way, but one with a heavy price.

He forced down his fury with a deep breath. "How?" he demanded darkly. "If you want me to do something, just say it and stop wasting my time!"

"Come closer, and I'll tell you," the white-clothed creature beckoned him.

"Fine," Xie Lian acquiesced.

Feng Xin was alarmed. "Your Highness! You're not actually…"

But then, Xie Lian pierced the heart of that white-clothed creature with his sword. He leaned in close.

"Speak."

With an exceedingly soft voice, the white-clothed creature whispered in his ear, and no one else heard exactly what he said. Yet the longer Xie Lian listened, the more his eyes widened. After listening for a while, he slapped the creature again, unable to hold back.

"I didn't say to tell me this!" he yelled. "What I want is a solution! A cure!"

"I did tell you. That is the way," the white-clothed creature said. "It all depends on whether you're willing to do it."

Xie Lian's face twisted. "What exactly do you want…? Who are you, really?"

The white-clothed creature chuckled. "Who am I? Can't you take off my mask and see for yourself?"

Xie Lian had already planned to do just that, so he yanked off the half-crying half-smiling mask in a fit. The next second, he froze completely.

Behind that mask, the one smiling at him had the fair and handsome face of a young man. His eyes twinkled with life, a smile curved his lips, and his expression was endlessly gentle and modest.

It was his own face!

Chapter 39:
Gilded Figure, Exertion to Block Celestial Ruin

XIE LIAN WAS BEYOND OUTRAGED. He yanked the sword out of the creature's chest and was about to thrust again when he realized there wasn't a trace of blood on the blade. Instantly he understood and changed course, slashing off the white-clothed creature's head. The decapitation was swift, and when the head and its body were separated, both shriveled up into a heap of skin bags.

That body was an empty shell!

Twice he had met this creature, and twice he had used a fake body; not once had he shown himself in his true form. Although unsurprised, Xie Lian was still filled with furious resentment. His sword vented his anger on that soft, limp body, the sharp aura of the blade slashing the skin bag to shreds, but still he wasn't relieved. Feng Xin couldn't watch anymore and tried to stop him.

"Your Highness! It's only a shell."

But that shell was the exact image of Xie Lian's younger self, so it looked like Xie Lian was cruelly mutilating himself—it painted an uncomfortable picture. Xie Lian heaved a few deep breaths, then threw the sword to the side and sat on the ground.

"I know! But I can't believe he dared use my face!"

He was so very angry, and the other two crouched down in front of him. They waited in silence for a moment before Feng Xin spoke up.

"Your Highness, do you feel better? Don't take his bullshit to heart, he's just playing with you."

But Xie Lian replied, "No, some of the things he said to me weren't a joke, it's just…"

Feng Xin was shocked. "He actually told you how to lift the curse?"

Xie Lian's right hand grabbed at his own hair. "He didn't tell me how to cure Human Face Disease, what he told me was…how to *inflict* Human

Face Disease!”

The other two were aghast. “Inflict?”

Xie Lian nodded, then looked around. He felt it was best not to stick around Beizi Hill and that they should leave before talking. He didn’t want to see the soldiers avert their gazes nor hear the cries and whines of patients, so he returned to his bedchambers at the palace, which had been left empty for many years.

Once the doors were closed, Xie Lian finally managed to calm down somewhat. He sat down and spoke gravely.

“The faces growing on those people are dead souls from Yong’an. Some are those who died on the battlefield, but the majority are those who died in the drought.”

Mu Qing wasn’t surprised. “No wonder no one from Yong’an was infected with Human Face Disease; of course they wouldn’t attack their own people.”

Feng Xin frowned. “Those who died in the drought weren’t killed by those in the imperial capital. Even if they hold a grudge, there’s no reason to target us.”

Xie Lian breathed a sigh. “Even if that’s the case, you both know that when a person dies, there’s a period of confusion.”

When a person passed away, there was a period of time when their soul was like a newborn baby—barely conscious, half-cognizant, unaware of who they once were, where they were now, or what they were doing. Depending on the soul’s affinity, that period could be long or short and was called the “Period of Confusion.” Under those circumstances, the family or lovers of those spirits could guide or influence them, and the funerary custom of “Calling Spirits on the Seventh Day” was based on this.

“He…told me that the soldiers of Yong’an harbor an intense animosity toward the capital,” Xie Lian continued. “That their parents, spouses, children—many of them died in the drought.

“The souls of the dead are unconsciously affected by their families’ emotions, so he used the strong will of those soldiers to instill enmity within the souls. He urged them to take on others’ living flesh as a host and to fight for nourishment within their host’s body.

“It worked because those souls, in their period of confusion, were repeatedly indoctrinated by one thought: ‘If not for them, you could’ve survived.’”

“What kind of hellish belief is that, thinking you can judge who deserves to live or die?!” Feng Xin asked.

Xie Lian covered his forehead. “Lang Ying unintentionally buried the body of his son here at the capital, and that became a fuse for the creature’s curse. I told him to give me a cure, but even with all that talk, all he told me was how to cast the curse. What in the world?”

A curse couldn’t be lifted simply by knowing how it had been cast. Feng Xin cussed.

“He *is* playing with you. What the hell. What the fuck!”

Mu Qing, however, piped up. “He wasn’t playing with you. He did tell you the way.”

Between Xie Lian and Feng Xin, one looked up and the other turned his head.

“*What* way?”

“The way to lift the curse!” Mu Qing replied. His eyes were bright like he’d discovered a secret. “Yong’an’s curse works because they harbor hatred toward Xianle. But Xianle doesn’t harbor any less hatred toward Yong’an!”

Xie Lian’s eyes widened slightly, and his breathing hitched.

“Since he told you how to cast the curse, then an eye for an eye—you can cast the same curse and inflict Human Face Disease upon those in Yong’an!” Mu Qing continued. “Just think, the curse only works if there are live people powering it with their emotions. Once they’re infected by the disease, they’ll be too busy dealing with it, and maybe in the long run there won’t be any of them left to power it. And then the curse will break itself!”

Xie Lian had never thought of it that way. The explanation dumbfounded him for a moment, but then he blurted, “Absolutely not!”

"Why not?" Mu Qing pushed. "Don't forget, they were the ones who cast the curse first."

Xie Lian instantly rose to his feet. "No means no. Also, you're wrong. It's likely that the Yong'an soldiers have the same immunity as the soldiers of Xianle.. Don't ask me why, I—"

"Then infecting only civilians is fine too!" Mu Qing immediately cut in. "They don't have the capital's medical resources and helping hands. The moment Human Face Disease erupts, it'll spread much faster, and they'll have no way to fight back! Threatening the safety of the civilians to stop their curses would be exactly like forcing them to surrender. They can't compete with the capital in a battle of resources!"

Xie Lian instantly rejected the idea. "Absolutely not! Don't forget what we called them when they attacked the innocent civilians of the capital: *despicable*. If we do the same thing, won't we become just as despicable? How would we be any different?"

Mu Qing schooled his excitement. "Your Highness, don't forget the type of people who died to lure you into that Land of the Tenders snare. That's who you're calling 'innocent civilians.'"

Once that was said, Xie Lian fell into hesitation. To be honest, it was impossible for him not to take that incident to heart. Nonetheless, he stood firm.

"There are certainly those types. But that's because those who charge at the forefront are the most passionate, so they're the ones you see. In reality, most of the civilians know nothing. Go to Beizi Hill and you'll see," Xie Lian said. "Many of them don't even know why they're fighting. They'll go where there's food; they just want to survive. Mu Qing, what you're advising me to do right now is to save a group of innocent people by killing another group of innocent people. I…"

He sighed.

"Let me try to think of another way."

Mu Qing's tone was growing impertinent and somewhat mocking. "Why would I want to go to Beizi Hill to see how enemy civilians get on? Please. Your Highness, you're so considerate of others, but they've never been considerate of you. Doesn't that suck?"

Xie Lian was despondent and hung his head. The image of that leg packed with faces floated to the top of his mind, the leg that continued to squirm and twitch even after it had been severed. He hesitated for a long while, but in the end he still shook his head.

"At the end of the day, this isn't me being considerate. Even if we only consider ourselves, a curse is a double-edged sword by its very nature—it hurts us while it hurts others," Xie Lian said. "In order to curse someone, the living caster must possess a vicious heart, and those who died also cannot rest in peace. They suffered enough while alive, and now in death they must live on as monsters in another's flesh. You saw those things on that man's leg that day. Those faces that were desperately trying to live—how is a life like that any better than living as the one infected? Curses will always rebound one day, and no one will come to a good end."

Having been spurned repeatedly, Mu Qing was losing his patience.

"Before they reach *their* bad end, we will have already perished! You don't have a third path and there is no second cup of water. Wake up, Your Highness! You're running out of time."

Xie Lian could feel his head burning, and he closed his eyes. "Don't say any more. Let me think about it."

"…" At last, Mu Qing couldn't hold back any longer and started cursing under his breath. "You really are… The one suffering indecision is you. With a cure in hand, the one refusing it is also you. You're really… really annoying. Look at the hellish state of you—the mere sight of you is a pain. Your worshippers must've reaped enough bloody misfortune for eight lifetimes!"

At first, Feng Xin had listened to their argument glumly, and because he couldn't contribute any better ideas, he didn't join in. But at that, he suddenly raised his hand and shoved.

"Are you *done*?!"

Mu Qing was shoved back a few steps, and Xie Lian looked up.

"Feng Xin?"

"Your Highness, don't mind me!" Feng Xin shouted, then turned to Mu Qing to continue. "Why are you always so *irritated*? Tell us—just what, exactly, irritates you? I've tolerated you for a long time now, but I'm not going to hold back today! I can't fucking stand your type; you're nothing but a deputy general, and without His Highness' appointment, who knows where you'd be?! So why do you always act like you're smarter, sharper, and stronger than him? If you're so competent, why did His Highness ascend and not you?"

"I—!" Mu Qing cried.

Xie Lian pulled at him. "Drop it, Feng Xin, Mu Qing is just anxious over the current situation—"

"Anxious, my ass!" Feng Xin cut in. "Your Highness, I'm telling you, all he ever wants is to find reasons to lecture you; he won't let go of any chance he gets to show he's better than you, because he genuinely, seriously believes he's better than you! With an apathetic person like him, you don't usually see any sign that he actually cares about the Kingdom of Xianle. But now suddenly he's anxious?"

He turned to Mu Qing again. "You really think I can't tell that you think His Highness is a fool? I can tolerate your sarcasm and those rolling eyes, I can tolerate you always standing where you shouldn't in the Upper Court. You like to show off and it's hardly the first time you've pulled this shit, so fine, go show off, you're not good enough to wow the heavens anyway. His Highness doesn't mind, so I don't give a shit either. But since you're gonna cross the line, I'm not gonna hold back. Listen up! I'm not surprised you'd leap at the chance to use despicable means, but His Highness is His Highness—no matter what he decides, you better respect it. Don't you dare be so critical, and don't forget who the *fuck* you are!"

As Feng Xin tore into Mu Qing, Xie Lian tried stopping him multiple times, but because he'd been holding back for so long, he couldn't be stopped from spilling everything in one go. Mu Qing's face paled by a shade with every word. At first, he jerked as if he wanted to fight. But by the end, he stood unspeaking, glaring ominously at Feng Xin.

Xie Lian was furious. "Are you done?! Do you want me to kick both of you out?!"

Feng Xin's face was completely beet red with all the blood that had rushed to his head, and he stiffened his neck. "Kick me out for all I care. I don't give a shit about being a heavenly official! If it wasn't for Your

Highness's appointment, I really wouldn't give a damn," he declared. "But even if you boot me back to the Mortal Realm and I become human again, I will still be loyal to you, Your Highness. At your command, I will be the first to charge forward, but I won't stand for a traitor! If this guy can't use you as a stepping-stone to become a heavenly official himself, he might not even bother following you anymore. I bet he doesn't even have a single good thing to say about you. There! I'm done!"

At first, Mu Qing was silent, his lips pursed tightly, but he'd held back for too long as well. He couldn't put up with it anymore and yelled back.

"Fucking *use* him? What a beautiful speech, but what do you know?!"

Xie Lian was going mad. "Both of you shut up! *Shut up!*"

The two bit back their retorts with immense difficulty. The dispute this time was too great, and even training idioms couldn't save them. It was a while before Xie Lian could push down his fury.

"In any case…cursing is a no-go," Xie Lian stated, his head throbbing.

Mu Qing scoffed, but still he acknowledged, "Sure. You're the boss."

Feng Xin was more succinct. "Yes, sir."

Mu Qing returned to his normal impassive self and said, "If there were any consequences, His Highness would take on the burden himself anyway."

Feng Xin clicked his tongue but didn't say another word.

Xie Lian acquiesced immediately, "Of course. I've already decided —"

Just then, the three of them all felt violent tremors, their bodies swaying with the quakes. Xie Lian was bewildered.

"What's going on?"

Feng Xin was the first to react. "Earthquake!"

With earthquakes came casualties, and Xie Lian shouted, "Save the people!"

Just as they were about to rush out, someone quickly rolled from under the bed and extended their arms.

"Cousin! Cousin, don't forget about me! Take me along too!"

Seeing him, Xie Lian was even more perplexed. "Qi Rong, why are you in my chambers?!"

He couldn't possibly fathom the bizarre life Qi Rong led, having nothing better to do all day than collect anything related to Xie Lian. He also didn't know how long Qi Rong had been listening in on them in secret, but with such a dire situation at hand, he didn't have the time to question him. He grabbed Qi Rong's arm and ran, disposing of him in an open area. There was chaos within the palace, and countless attendants screamed as they rushed out of that extravagant building.

"Is anyone hurt?! Is there anyone trapped?!" Xie Lian called out loudly.

Fortunately, it wasn't long before the earthquake stopped, and after inquiring around, it seemed there were no wounded or dead. Nevertheless, he was tense. Suddenly, there was another scream, and many were pointing at the sky behind him. Xie Lian whipped around, and his pupils shrank.

At the center of the palace there was a gigantic, magnificent pagoda, and it was now tilting to the side at a dangerous angle.

The Celestial Pagoda was going to collapse!

This Celestial Pagoda—known officially as "The Pagoda of Celestial Being"—had centuries of history in its walls and was one of the signature features of the Xianle Palace. It was also the tallest building in all of the imperial capital, sitting at its heart between the palace and the city. It was a renowned landmark. If this pagoda fell, there would be innumerable casualties. The palace attendants and the pedestrians on the streets outside all started fleeing with even more panic.

Seeing this, Xie Lian's right hand swiftly moved to cast a spell, and he yelled in the direction of Mount Taicang.

"Come!"

The pagoda continued to lean slowly, and just as it bent one-third of the way down, the masses suddenly felt another round of tremors.

This tremor also came from the ground, yet it was different from that of an earthquake. The tremors came one at a time with their own rhythm, and they came faster and faster, closer and closer. As the pagoda continued to tilt, the people finally realized that those tremors were the footsteps of something.

A giant golden statue—its glowing body over fifteen meters tall, a sword in one hand, flower in the other, its body streaked with rays of light—was striding toward the palace!

“Isn’t that the crown prince statue from the Royal Holy Temple’s Palace of Xianle?!” someone shouted in amazement.

Soon, many more recognized it. “It’s true! It’s the golden statue! Look, it’s coming from Mount Taicang!”

Every step that golden statue took spanned kilometers, but it didn’t step on a single person. *Thump-thump, thump-thump,* it strode into the palace as if in flight and caught the collapsing Celestial Pagoda. That glowing gilded figure, shining with golden light under the setting sun, raised both hands and exerted all its strength to hold up the gigantic pagoda that had almost fallen. It was the very image of a miracle, shocking countless witnesses into awed silence.

Meanwhile, Xie Lian slowly withdrew his hand and looked up at his divine statue. Gazing at that calm, handsome gilded face, confusion flickered through his mind.

Chapter 40:
Vow to Never Forget. Never!

THIS WAS THE VERY FIRST DIVINE STATUE the people had built for him, and it was also the most magnificent and stately. In the past, seeing that version of “himself,” Xie Lian had simply accepted it, not seeing any problem. Yet at that very moment he saw that golden, scintillating giant figure as endlessly foreign and couldn’t help but think…

Is that really me?

Feng Xin and Mu Qing went about separately to check for trapped victims who hadn’t yet been found. That flicker of confusion passed quickly, and seeing the crowds settling, Xie Lian breathed a sigh of relief.

But before that breath was completely exhaled, his heart lurched when he suddenly felt a heavy weight on his body.

That Celestial Pagoda was too tall and too heavy after all.

The divine statue also seemed to find its burden strenuous. Its hands trembled, its feet sank into the ground, and its gigantic golden body was slightly bent from the pressure—only that smile remained unchanging. Seeing this, Xie Lian immediately cast another spell. However, when the spell was cast, his heart dropped. Not only did the golden statue not straighten up, it was pushed down even further and looked like it might not be able to hold on much longer.

Xie Lian’s hands, too, started trembling. He had never felt like this before. Whatever mountain he punched, that mountain must fall, and should he stomp, the earth would quake—this was all he had ever known about himself. And at that moment, he had never so fully understood the concept of strength falling short of desire.

With no other choice, Xie Lian clenched his teeth and leapt into the air. He landed and seated himself on the foot of that gigantic golden statue before raising his hands to cast spells once more with renewed force. This time, he joined the fray himself, and sure enough, that golden statue rose again, its head shot up, and it raised the leaning Celestial Pagoda up once more.

Although he managed to bear its weight, both Xie Lian's back and his mind were rolling with cold sweat. However, the countless people outside the palace were ignorant of his unspeakable hardship and were already approaching in waves to prostrate at the miraculous golden statue, hollering as they did.

"In the kingdom's time of need, His Highness the Crown Prince has shown his divine spirit before us!"

"Your Highness, you must save us!"

"Save the people! Protect the world!"

Xie Lian was gritting his teeth, and it was a while before he managed to say, "Everyone, please stand up and back away. Go further, do not stand around here, I…"

He trailed off, suddenly realizing he was actually running out of breath. His voice was drowned out by the tidal cheers, and the more he tried to amplify it, the smaller he found himself to be. Xie Lian drew a deep breath and was about to shout again when a hand suddenly grabbed his ankle. He looked down, and it was Qi Rong.

"Qi Rong, hurry and tell everyone not to crowd around here," he quickly said, "the pagoda might collapse!"

Those words were unintentionally blurted, and when Xie Lian realized what he had said, his blood ran cold.

In the past, it wasn't just that he would never have said those words, the mere thought of them would never have entered his mind. Even if the sky was going to fall, he would have believed he could support it. But now, he realized something alarming—he no longer believed that.

Not only had the people stopped believing in him, even he could no longer believe in himself.

"How can it collapse? Aren't you holding it up?!" Qi Rong responded instantly without thought.

Hearing him, Xie Lian felt his heart quiver again. Qi Rong didn't notice his ashen expression, and his eyes were bright with a hungry look.

“Cousin, let me help you.”

Xie Lian was taken aback. “Help me? How?”

“Didn’t you say you knew how to inflict Human Face Disease?” Qi Rong immediately replied. “Tell me how to do it, and I’ll help you curse Yong’an. I’ll help you kill them!”

So he *did* hear everything they discussed while he was hiding under the bed!

Xie Lian was weak from sheer anger. “You—you fool! Don’t you know what a curse is?”

However, Qi Rong was nonchalant. “I do. Isn’t it just a curse? Cousin, let me tell you, I have quite the talent in this area. I curse my dad often, and I suspect he may have died from my curses, you—”

“…” Xie Lian couldn’t listen anymore and said, “Just go.”

“No! *No*!” Qi Rong exclaimed. “Fine, don’t tell me how to cast the curse. Just tell me…how can I avoid getting infected by Human Face Disease?”

Xie Lian’s heart continued to drop, and Qi Rong pressed him, “You know how, right? You know why the soldiers weren’t getting infected, don’t you? Cousin, tell me why. Please?”

There were still many palace attendants gathered nearby, and who knew just how many ears were listening. Xie Lian was afraid that leaking information might start something terrible, so he remained silent. But sure enough, some people couldn’t keep quiet any longer and began to bombard him with questions.

“Your Highness! Is that true?”

“You really know how to cure Human Face Disease?!”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

There was a ravenous glint in the people’s eyes, in Qi Rong’s eyes. Xie Lian kept his mouth shut tightly, managing only to grit a response through his teeth.

“No! I don’t know anything!”

That caused a small disturbance in the crowd, but it didn't escalate. Just then, Feng Xin returned. He saw from afar that Qi Rong was lurking near Xie Lian and barked at him.

"What are you doing?!"

"Feng Xin, come take him away!" Xie Lian immediately ordered.

Feng Xin acknowledged the command and came forward, but Qi Rong latched on to Xie Lian as he cried fervently, "Cousin, you're going to defeat Yong'an and chase them all away for sure, right?! You'll protect us for sure, right?! RIGHT?!"

A few months ago, maybe Xie Lian would have still emphatically answered with fervor, *"I will protect you all!"* But he didn't dare do so any longer. Qi Rong's expression was wild with excitement, and Xie Lian was a little puzzled watching him. He knew very well that Qi Rong was not the type to be concerned with the kingdom, nor its people. Even if the kingdom was doomed, he should be more scared than anything, so why the excitement? Moments later, he suddenly remembered—wasn't Qi Rong's father from Yong'an?

Hearing no response, Qi Rong's voice suddenly turned sharp. "Cousin! You won't really let this happen, right?! Are you just going to let us be trampled and ridiculed like this? Do we really have no other way?!"

Under this interrogation, Xie Lian could feel his heart breaking. Because he realized—Qi Rong wasn't wrong. In the face of everything, he really…really didn't know what to do!

"Let me go and request that the king detain him again," Feng Xin said.

Even while being dragged away Qi Rong was still struggling, and he roared, "YOU HAVE TO HOLD ON! YOU CAN'T FALL!"

He couldn't fall!

Xie Lian himself knew that he couldn't afford to fall. Even if the nearby civilians evacuated, the Celestial Pagoda must not be allowed to fall. If it collapsed, not only would the centuries-old royal monument be destroyed, the main part of the Grand Avenue of Divine Might, with its many residences, would be demolished. Moreover, within the pagoda there were countless rare treasures, centuries-old scrolls passed down from countless ancestors of generations past. They couldn’t be retrieved in time, and if the pagoda collapsed, they would all be gone. And if it collapsed, it would bring down with it the royal eminence of the Kingdom of Xianle.

However, his spiritual power, like Yong’an’s water, seemed to be draining by the day. In order to support that gigantic golden statue, he couldn’t leave his position for even a moment. He had to pass on the duty of guarding the city to Feng Xin and Mu Qing while he staunchly remained where he was, meditating in forced calm. And since that dozens-meter-tall golden statue was the divine statue worshipped on Mount Taicang within the Royal Holy Temple, after Xie Lian summoned it over, the devotees there had no idol to worship and they came in swarms to pray to it under the open skies. Although this was the palace and outsiders shouldn’t have been allowed to enter, the earthquake had collapsed a section of the palace walls. The capital was in chaos, and there wasn’t enough authority to go around—even if there was, any more oppressive acts of authority might incite another riot, so the people had to be let through.

Xie Lian stayed seated there, and the king and queen would visit him every day. Days passed in a blur as he spent all of his power holding that Celestial Pagoda up while trying to restore his energy at the same time, waiting for a time to come when he could be relieved. The king didn’t have it any easier—his hair was now mostly white, and even though he was in his prime, he had the appearance of a man over fifty. When father and son saw each other, though they didn’t speak, they were now more at peace with each other than ever before.

The queen had watched Xie Lian grow up, but she had only ever seen her beloved son in a state of elegance and divinity. Now, it was with sorrow and grief that she watched him bitterly guard the palace, exposed to the harsh elements and refusing to let anyone close to help cover him. She stood under the scorching sun herself to shield him from the rays with an umbrella. After a while, fearing that she was exhausted, Xie Lian spoke up.

“Mother, go back, I don’t need this. Don’t come near, and don’t let anyone else come close, I’m scared that…”

But in the end, exactly what he feared never left his lips. The queen’s back was facing the devotees gathered there, and having kept her composure for so long, tears at last streamed down her face.

“My child, you’ve suffered so terribly. Why…why would such punishment befall you?!”

The queen painted her face heavily to hide its pale, sallow complexion, but with her tears, the foundation melted and revealed a woman who was no longer youthful. She grieved for her son, wept for her son, but she didn’t dare weep out loud for fear that the people would notice her upset. The king held her shoulders, and Xie Lian watched her in dazed confusion.

When they suffer, the first thing people think of is their loved ones, and to Xie Lian that meant his mother. It would be pointless, perhaps, to state it aloud, but after days of exhausting strain, after having been cut down again and again by countless knives, right then he really wanted to be ten years old again and run into his mother’s embrace to cry to his heart’s content.

And yet, every road he walked that had led to this day was chosen by Xie Lian himself. His parents were already in a difficult situation, and with so many citizens watching him intently, he could never show a trace of weakness. If even he couldn’t hold on, who could?

Thus, Xie Lian spoke against his heart. “Don’t worry, mother. I’m all right. I’m not suffering.”

Whether he was suffering or not, only he knew deep down.

A few palace attendants came to help the king and the queen away, and as they left, they looked back with every step. Once they were gone, Xie Lian was again exposed under the scorching sun, and lethargy overtook him. Some time passed, and when he opened his eyes again, dusk was settling on the horizon. The setting sun had shone its last rays, and only a few scattered devotees were left below him.

When he looked down, he noticed that not far from where he sat there was a small, lonesome flower.

Xie Lian wasn’t very sure when exactly that flower had been placed there, and he reached to pick it up.

It was a tiny flower. Snow-white with a lush green stem, its stalk thin and weak, bearing tear-like dew, pitiful looking. The faint fragrance was almost familiar, and though ordinary, it gladdened his spirit.

He clutched the flower tight despite himself and pressed it near his heart.

Just then, the sudden stench of blood overtook that faint fragrance. Xie Lian looked up, and his sight was muddled by a screaming shadow that hurtled toward him.

“Why?! *Why?!*”

Startled, Xie Lian repelled his attacker with a wave of his sleeve and tried to summon some strength. “Who?!”

The shove sent the person tumbling and rolling over the ground. Xie Lian still had to support the giant golden statue and didn’t dare rise, didn’t dare go close, but it only took a second for him to recognize who it was. That individual only had one leg—it was the young man who once gave him an umbrella, the one whose leg he’d personally amputated!

That young man was covered in blood, with equally stained palms. He had come crawling using both hands and his one remaining foot, and there was a horrifying trail of blood behind him.

He sat up with difficulty, and Xie Lian asked, dumbfounded, “Why… why are you here? Weren’t you recuperating in Buyou Forest?”

The young man only crawled closer, not answering him. Since he only had one leg, it was a horrifying sight.

“You—!” Xie Lian exclaimed.

In a fit, that young man yanked up the trouser hem of his remaining right leg and demanded, “WHY?!”

On his right leg, there was a contorted human face!

This was one of the things Xie Lian had worried about the most, and sure enough, it had come to pass. If he wasn’t already seated, he might have fallen over. The young man slapped at the ground and roared.

“Why did you cut my leg off?! It still came back! My leg is gone! Why?! Give me back my leg! *Give me back my leg!*”

That rainy day, this young man’s face had been full of smiles when he stuffed that umbrella into Xie Lian’s hands. Yet before him now, he was in a state of madness; the difference was striking. Xie Lian’s mind was in chaos, a complete mess, and his voice trembled.

“I…”

It took him moments before he snapped out of it and said, “Let…let me help you!”

He quickly cast a spell to suppress the evil poison circulating in that young man’s leg. Yet unexpectedly, the sound of wailing came from all around, and several more people also lunged at him, crying:

“Your Highness, save me!”

“Your Highness, *save me*!”

“Your Highness, look at my face; I’ve cut off half my face, so why is it still not healed, why?! Just what do we have to do to cure this?!”

“Your Highness, look at me, look what I’ve become!”

Scene after gory scene was endlessly thrust before him. Xie Lian’s expression was blank with shock. Not knowing what to do with his hands, he waved them as he mumbled, “No, I don’t want to look, I don’t want to look!”

As it turned out, once the Human Face Disease patients from Buyou Forest relapsed, a full riot erupted at last. Shockingly, they managed to fight through the soldiers and doctors guarding and nursing them and escaped the camp in search of him!

Since they had all escaped, if he didn’t immediately suppress their infections, the disease might spread faster to the wider population. Xie Lian closed his eyes and tried to work his powers, wanting to help alleviate their symptoms and relieve their pain for the time being. However, as soon as that group was taken care of, more swarmed over to surround him.

“Your Highness, me! Help me too!”

Surrounded by dozens, Xie Lian vaguely felt the golden statue above him swaying, and apprehension filled him.

“Wait, wait! I—”

Someone couldn't wait and cried, "No, I don't want to wait, I've already waited too long!"

"Your Highness, why would you treat him but not me?!"

Soon, the voices around him changed.

"How come when you treated him, *he* was good as new, but *I'm* not any better? Aren't you a god?! Why are you so unfair?! I demand justice!"

Xie Lian argued back, "No, I'm not being unfair! This isn't on me, your symptoms are different—"

"If you're going to help, help all the way! Now you wanna drop everything; what exactly are you playing at?! Is it up to you to decide?!"

Xie Lian was having trouble catching his breath. "I'm not dropping anything, I'm just—just wait—"

"Don't you know how to cure this disease?!"

Xie Lian opened his mouth. "I—"

"If you know, why won't you tell us?!"

Xie Lian clutched his own head. "I don't know anything!"

"You're lying! I already heard someone talking—you know! I've seen through you! You won't tell us because you just want us to keep begging you like this so you can steal our donation money! Liar! You're a liar!"

"What's the cure, just tell us! Tell us now!"

Xie Lian's face was white as a sheet, his eyes vacant. Countless hands shoved him, and there was even a pair maliciously strangling him. Then, the most ridiculous thing happened. He was clearly a god of heaven, but in that moment, a feeble voice cried out at the bottom of his heart…

Save me—

It seemed like someone was pulling those hands away, but at the same time not—he couldn't be sure. The only things he could see were those bloody, scarred faces, those people with missing limbs, who looked like they were going to tear him apart and devour him piece by piece.

He didn’t know how long it had been when, in the far distance, he heard the demonic howling of a horn. The crowd only cared for their own screaming and tearing and ignored that horn completely, but Xie Lian snapped out of it instantly. That was the sound of Yong’an’s victory horn!

He couldn’t sit still any longer, or perhaps the burden had finally crushed him—his body bent, and he keeled over. At the same time, the giant gilded figure he had so arduously supported mimicked his movement, and like its life was suddenly snuffed out, it collapsed with a *boom*.

Along with it came another loud rumble—that gigantic, heavy Celestial Pagoda came crashing down, crumbling like the golden statue.

The gilded figure shouldn’t have been so breakable, but because Xie Lian had injected too much spiritual power into it, hoping that it’d hold up the Celestial Pagoda, it had long since grown fragile. The patients who had escaped Buyou Forest were fleeing, dying, getting hurt. The crowds scurried wildly through the palace and the streets, some dodging fragments of that Celestial Pagoda, some dodging those horrifying disease victims. With both hands clutching his own head, Xie Lian ran and stumbled as he headed for the grand gates of the imperial city.

The city towers were ablaze, rolling with thick, black smoke. Xie Lian rushed up to the terrace, passing numerous distraught, fleeing soldiers, but when he arrived at the platform, he didn’t know what to do. He stared down below at a complete loss, his face ashen and streaked with tears that had started to flow without him realizing. In his blurry field of vision, corpses scattered the fields—only the silhouette of a white-clothed figure was distinct, his expansive sleeves fluttering. That figure wasn’t a youth but a man, and when he turned his head, he spotted Xie Lian from afar. He waved at him in a carefree manner, looking like he was about to vanish into the air.

Seeing this, Xie Lian cried sharply, “Don’t go!”

The first two times Xie Lian had encountered him, he’d used a fake skin. This time, Xie Lian’s instincts told him that this must be his true form! Thus, he hopped over the city wall without hesitation and leapt from the tall battlement.

Xie Lian had jumped from extreme heights countless times. Relying on his strong spiritual power and martial might, he landed safely every time, and it always filled him with pleasure and pride. Every time, he was the very picture of the celestial descents they spoke of in legends.

This time, however, he was no longer a legend.

When he landed, he wasn’t steady, and his foot twisted. A needle-sharp pain instantly shot up his leg and through his entire body.

He had broken his leg.

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Breaking a leg wasn’t really a big deal, and it soon healed. But since that day, it were as though Xie Lian had become an entirely different person.

It was like he had lost his spirit and divine invincibility. After the first defeat, there would be a second, and then a third… He didn’t want to draw his sword nor join the battlefield anymore, but because there was no one who could shield or replace him, he could only boldly sally forth. On the battlefield, he didn’t slack off; he genuinely did his utmost, but for some reason, even though he was clearly a young man barely past twenty, the hand holding the sword shook like that of an ailing elder.

He shuddered with a heart full of fear, yet he couldn’t explain who or what exactly he was afraid of. Finally, the soldiers who used to revere him began to lose patience. Xie Lian knew that a rumor had started circulating among them: *“How is he a martial god? More like a god of misfortune!”*

He couldn’t rebut it, because he had also started wondering the same thing: had he really, maybe, turned into a god of misfortune?

It would’ve been wonderful if that was the only issue. But the real catastrophe, the thing that sealed the Kingdom of Xianle’s doom, was that Human Face Disease was now completely out of control. Five hundred, one thousand, two thousand, three thousand… Toward the end, Xie Lian no longer dared ask just how many people had been infected today.

And at the end of it all, like a sentence handed down to a criminal, the Heavenly Realm at last reopened its gates to him and sent forth a message: *“Your Highness, it is time to return to the Upper Court.”*

It was clear what would be waiting for him when he returned to the heavens. Feng Xin and Mu Qing both looked a little uneasy for once, while Xie Lian, on the other hand, was concerned with something else.

"Before we leave, I want to go somewhere to have a look," he said to them.

"Where?" Feng Xin asked.

"The Royal Holy Temple," Xie Lian replied.

After a moment of silence, Feng Xin said, "Don't."

Xie Lian had already walked off on his own.

"Your Highness!" Feng Xin cried, but seeing that he couldn't be stopped, he and Mu Qing could only run after him.

The three of them hiked up the mountain on foot. The Royal Holy Temple was where Xie Lian's first holy temple had been erected, and it was also where his first divine statue was built. However, by the order of the state preceptor, those three thousand disciples had long since been disbanded and sent down the mountain, and the Royal Holy Temple stood empty.

When they were halfway up the mountain, Xie Lian looked down. He could see clusters of fires ablaze everywhere in the capital, the brilliant flames reflecting a sky full of twinkling stars—a beautiful sight to behold.

Feng Xin, however, yelled angrily, "Those madmen!"

Xie Lian's eyes were transfixed by the flames, and Feng Xin tried again.

"Stop looking! There's nothing good to see!"

In recent days, Feng Xin had yelled at Xie Lian countless times: *"Do you enjoy finding grief for yourself or what?"* But truthfully, Xie Lian didn't know what he wanted to do. He only knew that whenever another one of his temples was burned down or desecrated, he was uncontrollably drawn to see it for himself. Yet once he'd seen, he couldn't speak nor stop anyone—he could only stand there and watch helplessly. What was there to see? He didn't know either.

Firelight was also blazing on the Crown Prince Summit. Feng Xin was aghast.

“They couldn’t even let the Royal Holy Temple go?! Did someone desecrate their ancestors’ graves or something…?”

He trailed off and shut up, since he realized the suffering of those from Xianle was far worse than any sarcastic comments about “desecrating ancestors’ graves.”

However, the fire wasn’t severe, and it soon died down, seemingly extinguished by someone. Now Feng Xin was really surprised—these days, there were only people who dared to set fire, not extinguish the flames. If anyone tried to step in, to talk down or stop those angry mobs from setting fires and destroying temples, they would be treated like the very “God of Misfortune” Xie Lian himself and get beaten to death. Because of this, the three of them no longer dared to reveal themselves before mortals and had long since hidden away their forms.

All along the path up the mountain, the three could hear the commotion of a brawl. Once they reached the Crown Prince Summit, sure enough, the Palace of Xianle had already been mostly torn down, leaving only the frame and walls of the great hall. That huge divine altar no longer held a divine statue, and there was a gang of riffraff brawling in front of that decrepit hall entrance, jeering as they fought.

“You damned mutt! Shitty brat! Did your wife lose her fucking virginity here or what?! Is this broken shrine your precious family jewels or something?!”

With one look, Xie Lian knew that this group didn’t come to destroy his temple out of anger. They were just a gang of punks who reveled in disorder, and they were either taking advantage of the situation or burning the temple down purely for fun. However, at this point he didn’t really care who was tearing his temples down anymore.

Just then, in that crazed brawl, the exceedingly vicious voice of a boy pierced through and echoed in the night sky.

“Beat it!”

Listening closely, this was actually one person fighting the rest. Moreover, that one person was only a young teenager, still very much a child but relentless all the same, and he didn’t seem to be losing ground. Nevertheless, it was still one against many. The boy’s face was already covered in blood and grime, battered blue and purple with cuts all over, to the point that his actual appearance was no longer recognizable.

“That brat will definitely grow up to be a good man!” Feng Xin commented.

Just then, a malicious glint flashed in one of the men’s eyes, and he lifted a giant rock from the ground, ready to bash it into the back of that boy’s head. Xie Lian saw and waved his hand once. The rock in that man’s hands instantly rebounded, smashing into his own face, and he screamed as blood splattered out of his nose. The boy was stunned at the sight, but he immediately whirled around and raised his fist for another bout of berserk beating.

The way he fought was too frightening, and it scared away that gang of grown men.

They pointed at him as they fled, shouting empty threats. “Fuck! Just you wait! We’ve got more guys, and we’ll get you yet!”

The boy sneered. “You dare come back and I’ll fucking kill you!”

That terrified the men, and they ran off faster. With the fistfight over, the boy rushed over to a small mound and vigorously stomped on a fire that had already been extinguished, killing the last few sparks. After doing so, he entered the great hall. He picked up a piece of paper from the ground, carefully flattened it, and hung it above the altar. Finally, he sat down and leaned against the altar, lost in a daze.

Xie Lian walked over and leapt airily onto the altar. He discovered that the paper the boy had hung there was a painting. The brushwork was immature, obviously done by someone who had never learned how to paint. Yet every stroke was serious and sincere, depicting the solemn figure of the God-Pleasing Crown Prince. It seemed that this was used to replace the divine statue Xie Lian had summoned away.

“Very well painted!” Feng Xin remarked.

After all these trying days, Feng Xin had finally found someone who would still defend Xie Lian. He was already so excited that he’d almost joined the fight earlier to help the boy out, so naturally he felt that anything the boy did was great. Mu Qing, however, was unspeaking as he lowered his eyes, his eyes flickering as if he was recalling something. Xie Lian raised his hand and lightly flicked the painting.

It wasn't particularly obvious and could have easily been mistaken for a breeze blowing past. And yet the boy's head shot up from where it lay on his hugged knees, and that heavily injured face brightened instantly at the sight.

"Is that you?" he called out.

Feng Xin was shocked. "What a sharp little brat!"

"Let's go," Mu Qing said.

Xie Lian nodded lightly, and he was about to turn around to leave when the boy pounced on the edge of the altar, his breath coming quick.

"I know it's you! Your Highness, don't go! I have something to say to you!"

Hearing him, the three of them were taken aback. That boy seemed quite nervous, and with his fists clenched, he continued with what he meant to say.

"Even though your palaces and temples are burned down…don't be sad. I will build you many more temples in the future—bigger, more magnificent, better than anyone else's. No one will be able to compete with you. I'll do it!"

"…"

The three were silent.

That boy was dirty-faced and shabbily dressed, covered in bruises and cuts, looking extremely sad and pathetic. Yet he spoke such ambitious, bold words—it sounded truly laughable, which brought up complicated feelings. Seeming afraid that his voice might not reach Xie Lian's ears, he cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted toward the painting hung above the altar.

"Your Highness! Do you hear me?! In my heart, you are god! You are the only god, the one true god! *Do you hear me*?!"

He screamed with all he had, to the point where all of Mount Taicang echoed with his voice: *"Do you hear me?!"*

Xie Lian suddenly burst out laughing. This laugh came too abruptly, surprising both Feng Xin and Mu Qing. Xie Lian shook his head as he laughed. That boy obviously couldn't hear him, yet he seemed to have sensed something; his eyes were bright as he looked around. Suddenly, without warning, a drop of ice-cold water landed on his cheek. The boy's eyes bulged, and in that instant, his eyes reflected a snow-white figure. He blinked, and when he opened his eyes again, that reflection was gone.

Seeing that Xie Lian had actually showed himself for a second, Feng Xin spoke up.

"Your Highness, just now, did you…"

Xie Lian looked confused. "Just now? Oh, my power's failing…I slipped up for a moment, that's all."

The boy straightened up and rubbed hard at his eyes, as if trying desperately to retain that ephemeral shadow. Xie Lian, however, closed his own.

Moments later, he spoke. "Forget it."

He'd finally received a response, yet those were the words. That boy's eyes first lit up, his lips curling into a smile, but soon his expression turned to shock and the curve of his lips fell.

"What…? Forget what?"

Xie Lian breathed a sigh and said to him in a soft voice, "Forget me."

The boy was stunned and silent.

"Forget me. Soon, no one will remember anyway," Xie Lian mumbled to himself.

Hearing this, the boy's eyes widened. Silently, a single line of tears rolled down and washed a trail of pale white on his grimy face.

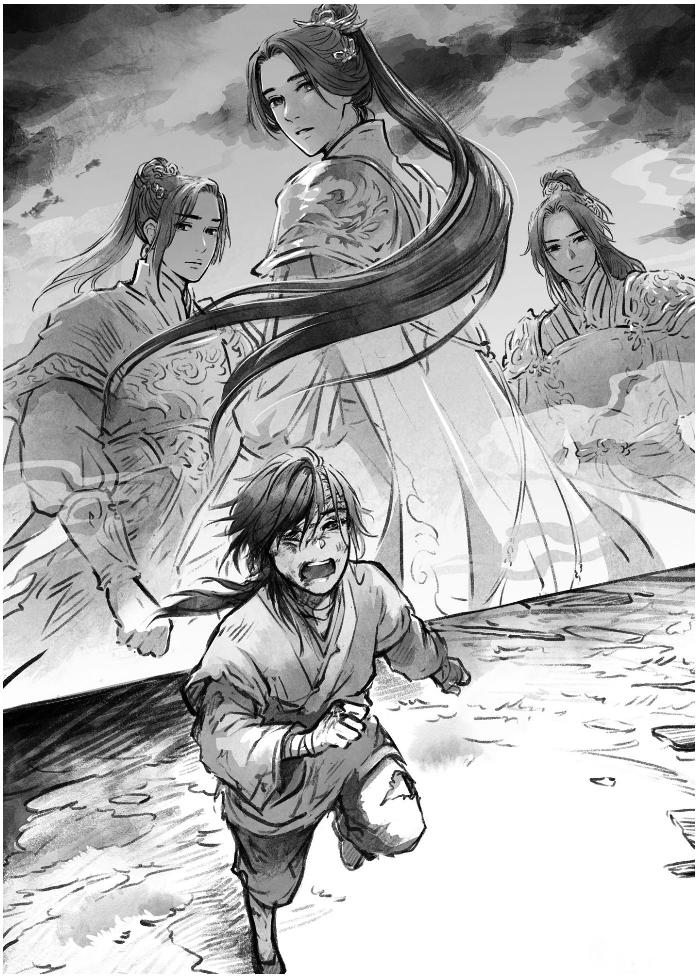
He swallowed hard and gasped. "I…"

Feng Xin seemed unable to bear the sight any longer and spoke up. "Your Highness, don't say anymore. You're breaking the rules again."

“Yes, I’m done. I’ve already broken so many rules, just a few more words won’t hurt,” Xie Lian said.

He didn’t let the boy hear that last part. The three descended from the altar and walked toward the entrance of the broken great hall. The night breeze cut through him, and Xie Lian shook his head. He was still a heavenly official for now, and technically he couldn’t feel cold. Yet at that moment, he somehow felt a bone-deep chill.

However, the boy they left behind in the great hall suddenly muttered, “I won’t.”

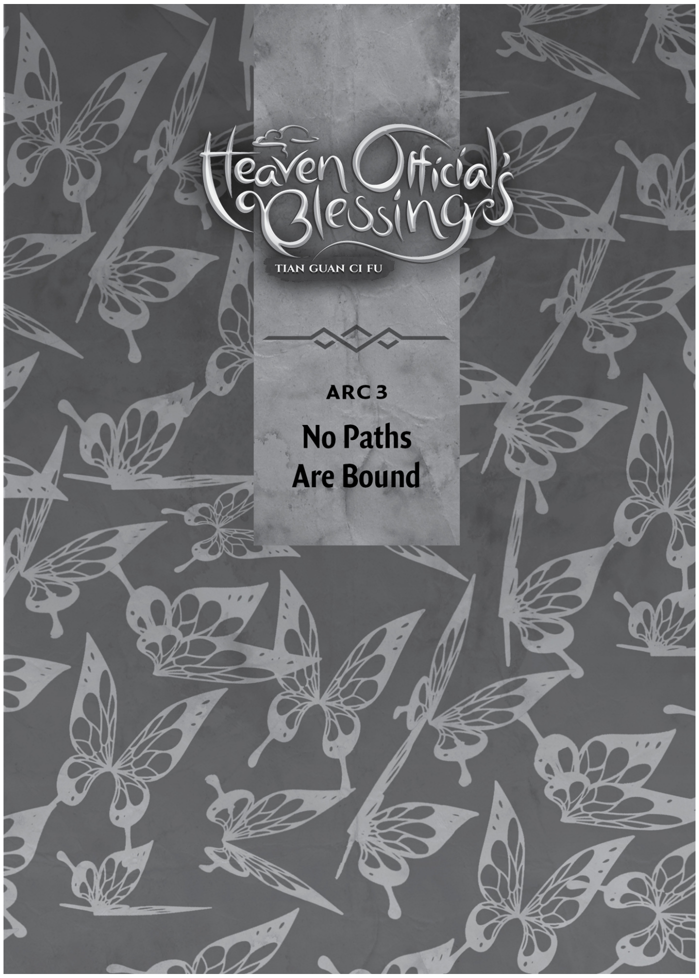


He clearly couldn’t see Xie Lian and his companions, but he somehow accurately grasped the right direction and charged out of the temple toward them, shouting at their retreating backs, “I *won’t*!”

The three of them looked back and saw the boy’s eyes, shining so bright in the black night they pierced the soul. That battered face was both furious and sorrowful, both joyous and wild.

In the midst of pouring tears, he cried: “I *won’t* forget!

“I will *never* forget you!”



Heaven Official's Blessing

TIAN GUAN CI FU

ARC 3

No Paths Are Bound

Chapter 41:
The Mid-Autumn Festival, Battling Lanterns on Moon-Watching Night

C*LANG!*

Sparks flew.

The blade penetrated deep into the stone floor. With both hands gripping the hilt, Xie Lian bowed his head and rested his forehead upon it. His teeth were gritted so hard they could have been ground to powder in his mouth.

“USELESS TRASH!” Qi Rong laughed out loud. “What useless trash! I knew you wouldn’t dare kill me! No matter how I humiliate you, no matter how I drag you through the mud, so long as I have a knife to someone else’s throat, you can’t do a thing to me. You useless coward—what’s a god like you still alive for?”

However, Xie Lian had already completely calmed. He looked up, his eyes cold.

“Don’t rejoice so soon. I can’t do anything to you, but there’s someone who can.”

Qi Rong humphed. “Are you planning to hug Jun Wu’s legs and beg him to help you again? Dream on. Did he care back then? Hmm?! And you still shamelessly follow on his heels. Are you really that stupid?”

Xie Lian peeled that magnificent, stately God-Pleasing costume off of Qi Rong, then he called Ruoye forth and tossed Qi Rong aside once he was bound.

“You better keep your mouth shut.”

“I’m not afraid of you. You’ve got nothing on me!” Qi Rong retorted.

“Well, are you afraid of Hua Cheng?” Xie Lian asked.

Qi Rong’s smile froze as Xie Lian threatened quietly.

“Just to give you a heads-up, if one of these days I fall into a bad mood, I might hand you over to Hua Cheng and have him think up a way to deal with you. So watch yourself, you hear me?”

Qi Rong couldn’t laugh anymore, not with that threat on the table. Terrified, he cried, “What the fuck?! You’re vicious! I can’t believe you’d come up with something like that! Why not just hand me over to Lang Qianqiu?!”

Xie Lian knelt on the floor. One by one, he picked up the small, coarse granules from the ground and from under the coffin. Truthfully, for the time being, he wouldn’t be delivering Qi Rong to the Upper Court, and the reason for that was specifically Lang Qianqiu. If Xie Lian surrendered Qi Rong, and Lang Qianqiu learned of Qi Rong’s whereabouts, Lang Qianqiu would immediately charge in with his sword to kill Qi Rong. *Should* Qi Rong be killed? That was a headache-inducing question. If he *was* killed, then what next? Another question that prompted headaches. For the moment, it would be unwise to hand Qi Rong to the Upper Court.

All things considered, requesting Hua Cheng’s help certainly sounded like a good idea. But really, Xie Lian was only using Hua Cheng’s name to scare Qi Rong a little. After all, he had already troubled Hua Cheng too many times, and whenever something happened, he thought of Hua Cheng first. Doing so yet again almost felt like he was being overly familiar. Even using Hua Cheng’s name to scare Qi Rong made Xie Lian feel rather embarrassed.

Qi Rong turned his head and spat a mouthful of blood, and the child reached out pathetically to rub his forehead.

“Dad, are you okay?” he asked. “Does it hurt?”

Qi Rong seemed to greatly enjoy playing this game of father and son, and he responded with singsong derision, “My good son! Daddy is just fine! Ha ha ha.”

The rims around Xie Lian’s eyes were red as he picked up each of those granules, and he placed them with the utmost care upon the God-Pleasing costume. The child quietly crawled over to help Xie Lian gather them.

Xie Lian saw those little hands and glanced up at him. The child said in a small voice, “Gege, won’t you stop beating up my dad? Let us go. We won’t steal from you again.”

Xie Lian felt a twinge in his heart, but he forced the feeling away. “What’s your name, little one?”

“My name is Guzi,” the child said.

Xie Lian finished collecting the ashes and wrapped them in the costume’s layers, then tied it up neatly before placing the bundle within the coffin anew and closing the cover.

He then slowly replied, “Guzi, that’s not your dad, it’s someone else. Your dad has been possessed. He’s currently a bad guy.”

Guzi was only confused by this explanation; he couldn’t comprehend what he was being told. “Someone else? No, I recognize him. He’s my dad.”

Qi Rong commended this response. “Not bad, not bad. I’ve picked up a cheap son, what a great bargain! Ha ha ha…*oof!*”

Xie Lian kicked him.

Guzi was still young and had for all his life been dependent on his father, so he was quite attached to the body Qi Rong now possessed and refused to abandon it so easily. Xie Lian couldn’t think of a way to manage the situation at the moment. With the sword Fangxin on his back, he solemnly kowtowed thrice toward the two coffins. Then, with Qi Rong dangling from his left hand and Guzi tucked under his right arm, he left Mount Taicang and returned with all speed to Puqi Village.

He had been gone for many days, and it was deep into the night by the time they made it back. The doors to Puqi Shrine were wide open, and clouds of incense rolled out. Upon the altar, the incense burner was stuffed to the brim with fragrant sticks, and the table itself was piled with offerings. Xie Lian swept a look across the altar as he entered, then grabbed two meat buns. He passed one to Guzi and rudely stuffed the other into Qi Rong’s mouth. That body was alive, after all. Until Xie Lian figured out how to yank Qi Rong out of the man, he required sustenance.

Qi Rong spat out the meat bun with a curse at its foul taste. With no small bit of worry in his tone, he yelled, “Hey! You won’t actually hand me over to Hua Cheng, will you?!”

Xie Lian sneered. “Are you very scared?”

He didn’t have time for this nonsense, and he turned around to rummage through his collection of pickle pots.

“Me? Scared?” Qi Rong stubbornly scoffed. “You should be the one who’s scared. You’re a heavenly official, but you’d dare pal around with a supreme! You…”

While he rambled, his eyes suddenly locked on to something. When Xie Lian bent down, something had peeked out of the front of his robes.

It was that crystal-clear ring. That was what caught Qi Rong’s eye.

Qi Rong seemed to be suspicious, though Xie Lian didn’t notice his stare. After a moment, Qi Rong asked, “Cousin Crown Prince, what’s that thing hanging around your neck?”

Xie Lian had planned on ignoring him, but Qi Rong had brought up something he himself was curious about. He turned around, his finger hooked on the thin silver chain.

“This? Do you know what it is?”

“Bring it here. Let me see, and I’ll tell you,” Qi Rong beckoned.

“If you know, then say it,” Xie Lian replied. “If you don’t, then shut up.”

“You’re always so nasty to the people close to you,” Qi Rong grumbled bitterly. “If you’re so impressive, why don’t you cop an attitude with strangers?”

Xie Lian tucked the silver chain back into the inner layers of his robe, pressing it against his skin as he straightened it.

“If *you’re* so impressive, keep talking. I’ll keep count of every word, and each one will take you a step closer to Hua Cheng’s blade.”

Without realizing it, Xie Lian had somehow grown used to leveraging Hua Cheng’s name.

Qi Rong sneered. “Don’t you use him to scare me! Maybe one of these days *you’ll* be the one dead under someone else’s blade! Don’t you wanna know what that thing is? I, who number among the Four Calamities, shall tell you: that’s a cursed ornament, an object of misfortune! Throw it out, and quickly. I can’t believe you’d keep it on you. Are you that tired of living after hanging around here for so long?”

Hearing this, Xie Lian straightened up immediately. “Is that true?”

“Duh!” Qi Rong said. “I’m telling you, man or ghost, whoever gave that to you must not mean well.”

“Oh.” Xie Lian squatted down again.

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, ‘OH’?!” Qi Rong cried.

Xie Lian didn’t bother turning to face him as he calmly responded, “‘Oh’ just means that it’d take a miracle for anyone to actually believe the things you say. I choose to believe in the person who gave this to me, and I’ve decided to keep wearing it.”

Xie Lian had always been gentle and courteous to others, but he was exceptionally cold toward Qi Rong. Qi Rong was vexed to death, cussing nonstop, and Xie Lian simply pretended to hear nothing. He realized that he couldn’t find the pot that contained Banyue, no matter how thoroughly he looked, and thought, *Perhaps the Wind Master already came by to take her away?*

As he listened to Qi Rong, he suddenly felt something was off.

Strange. Qi Rong was obviously terrified of Hua Cheng, so why was he still trying to provoke Xie Lian, as if…as if Qi Rong was trying to distract him on purpose!

Realizing this, Xie Lian startled. He shot Qi Rong a glare, and sure enough, he saw the ghost avert his gaze for an instant, looking mighty suspicious. An inexplicable gut feeling made Xie Lian look up. Not too far overhead, he spied a black-clothed man with his back pressed against the ceiling beams, adhered there like a giant bat.

Xie Lian immediately unsheathed Fangxin and hurled the sword up. Back pressed against the beam as it was, the man had to dodge the attack by whirling around and tumbling to the ground.

Guzi dropped his meat bun in fright and wailed. Before Qi Rong could scream too, Ruoye sealed his mouth and dragged him to a corner before binding him anew. At first Xie Lian had thought this was one of Qi Rong's lackeys, but after exchanging a few blows, he noticed this man was fast, aggressive, and oddly familiar. He could say with considerable certainty that at Qi Rong's level of competence, he lacked the power to command such a talented subject. Then he spotted something hugged in the crook of the man's other arm. Upon a closer look, it was a black pot—the very one that contained Banyue!

The Wind Master hadn't taken Banyue away?

Xie Lian instantly deduced who this was and blurted out, "Little Pei!"

It seemed Little Pei had come to steal Banyue, but he'd unexpectedly run into Xie Lian as he returned and had no choice but to hide above on the wooden beam. Because Qi Rong was bound by Ruoye and lying on the ground, he had immediately seen Pei Xiu. Qi Rong didn't know who he was, but if it was something harmful to Xie Lian, he thought it must be beneficial to himself. Qi Rong was afraid Xie Lian would sense someone was lurking and purposely kept trying to distract him with noise, yet somehow Xie Lian still noticed in the end.

Xie Lian bore two cursed shackles and Pei Xiu was in exile; neither had any spiritual power, so they could only fight barehanded. But Xie Lian had fought through his eight hundred years with nothing but his fists, so how could Pei Xiu possibly compare? It didn't take many rounds for Xie Lian to subdue him.

"Give back the pot!"

Xie Lian only shouted that offhandedly, but much to his surprise, Pei Xiu really threw the pickle pot to him. Startled, Xie Lian thought, *Is General Pei Junior really this easy to convince, that he'd return the pot simply when asked? Don't we usually have to push each other around a bit longer for this kind of thing?*

As Pei Xiu threw the pot, he urged Xie Lian in a desperate, hushed voice, "Hurry and go!"

His tone sounded genuinely anxious. Xie Lian stretched out his hands to catch the pot as it flew at him, but it suddenly changed course and flew out the window. In the next moment, they heard another man's voice coming from some distance away.

"You've really disappointed me."

The colors of Pei Xiu's face changed. "General…!"

He and Xie Lian rushed out of Puqi Shrine. Sure enough, on the roof of a house in the distance stood Pei Ming.

He was dressed in casual attire rather than his usual armor, and he looked exceptionally dashing, standing tall and slender with his confidence bright as the sun. The pot leisurely flew over to Pei Ming, then stopped, floating there. With a relaxed hand resting on the hilt of his sword, he spoke to Pei Xiu, who stood below.

"A man looks at the big picture and puts his career first. You're meant for great things, so what's going on with you? You'd screw yourself over for a little girl? Do you consider yourself such an immature brat?"

Pei Xiu hung his head low and didn't speak.

"You rose to your position in only two hundred years," Pei Ming continued. "Do you think it's that easy for everyone? I paved the road for you. It's easy to go down, but it ain't easy coming back up!"

They say it's lonely at the top, but whenever a god of heaven descended, they usually preferred to find high places to stand; the higher they were, the easier to regally survey all below. Xie Lian himself used to have that awful habit, but after he fell that one time, his leg ached terribly whenever he perched up high. This had quickly put an end to that tendency. All this being said, the tallest building within Puqi Village was the village head's home, and it was a simple tiled-roof house. General Pei really was doing himself a disservice by choosing it as the place to strike a pose.

However, that was beside the point. The point was, with a simple glance, Xie Lian knew exactly what was going on. Previously, Pei Ming had intended to pin blame on Banyue to clear Pei Xiu's name, and Xie Lian had stopped him. When he stood before Jun Wu, Pei Ming appeared to have given up, but he obviously hadn't abandoned the idea.

After that rotten business with the Gilded Banquet got out, Xie Lian could barely take care of himself, and his reputation had no doubt plummeted. General Pei probably thought it was an opportune moment to dredge up old affairs, hence why he was trying to drag both Pei Xiu and Banyue back to the Upper Court to appeal for a new trial. Truly relentless.

However, Pei Xiu didn't seem overly enthusiastic about the prospect, and he only breathed a sigh. "General, let's…just forget about this whole affair."

"You—!" Pei Ming looked speechless and exasperated. He had to be quite frustrated to lecture Pei Xiu without caring about Xie Lian's presence. Moments later, he suddenly declared, "Well, now I have to see what kind of amazing girl could make all my hard work go down the drain."

He reached out, seeming like he planned to shatter the pot. This way of opening it wouldn't normally pose a problem, but the issue was that Xie Lian didn't know whether Banyue's wounds had healed. If they had not, then it would be bad if the pot was opened so violently.

Xie Lian's face dropped and he lunged forward.

"Don't break it!"

Before Pei Ming's hand even touched the thing, the pot unexpectedly exploded by itself with a *bang*.

The air was choked with the smell of pickles, so strong it could drive any man mad. Pei Ming stood closest to the pot and was unfortunately completely plastered with pickles, and he was utterly flabbergasted by the sudden shower.

The clear, sonorous voice of a woman rang through the air. "General Pei is such an honorable man!"

A white-robed individual whirled out of that small pot. At first, she was only the size of a fist, but the more she flipped, the larger she became.

Xie Lian looked closer and cried, "Lord Wind Master!"

The one concealed in the pickle pot wasn't Banyue—it was Shi Qingxuan! She had hidden in the pot and blown a barrage of pickles at Pei Ming, but she herself had not a single stain on her fluttering white robes.

She landed steadily and swung her whisk. "Thank goodness, thank goodness. Good thing I already sent that little miss to someone else, otherwise she wouldn't have escaped General Pei's far-reaching arm."

Pei Ming prided himself on his charm and maintained good manners in all his endeavors, yet now he stank of pickles. In the face of Shi Qingxuan in female form, he was feeling a little woeful even as he kept up that mannered bearing.

"Qingxuan, why must you antagonize me like this?"

If it were anyone else, Pei Ming probably would've beaten them to a pulp already. But considering Shi Qingxuan's older brother, Pei Ming could do nothing but pick off the pickles. He brushed back his hair and gritted his teeth as he shook his head.

"*You*. You better not let me find out where you sent that little girl, or I'll certainly pay a personal visit."

The tone of his voice made his meaning clear: daring to take in Banyue meant opposing him, and he planned to seek trouble.

But Shi Qingxuan simply clapped.

"That's easy! It doesn't matter if I tell you where I sent her; I'd love to see you go visit. Listen well: the little miss is currently staying on Mount Yulong, at the Rain Master's mountain retreat! You dare go?"

At her words, the colors of Pei Ming's face changed slightly, and he didn't appear as confident as he had before. He schooled his expression and suddenly grew serious.

"Qingxuan, you're still young. That's why you like to fight over every little thing for the sake of justice. When you get older, you hopefully won't regret the things you're doing now!"

Then he leapt off the roof and disappeared. He actually left in quite a hurry.

Xie Lian felt a little bewildered. He sensed there was some sort of implication in Pei Ming's words, so he asked, "Lord Wind Master, what did he mean…?"

Shi Qingxuan brushed it off. "Nothing but empty threats."

Pei Xiu watched Pei Ming's silhouette disappear before coming over to greet the other two.

"Lord Wind Master, Your Highness."

Shi Qingxuan patted his shoulders. “Little Pei, very honest of you to come stop your general. Take good care of yourself down here and turn over a new leaf. If there’s a chance, I’ll speak well of you in the Upper Court, don’t you worry!”

Pei Xiu was speechless for a moment, but replied, “Thank you, My Lord. However, I can’t help but think you’ve misunderstood. General Pei isn’t usually like this. It’s only because of what happened in the past that he’s overly worried about me. Besides, you also know that Lord Rain Master…”

In the end, Pei Xiu seemed to feel he had said too much after all, so he shook his head and cupped his hands. “Farewell.”

The two of them watched him leave, and Xie Lian spoke again.

“Lord Wind Master, the Lord Rain Master you spoke of earlier—was it Rain Master Huang?”

Shi Qingxuan turned back around. “That’s right, the Rain Master hasn’t changed in centuries. What, someone you know? An acquaintance?”

Xie Lian shook his head and said softly, “Although I haven’t had the honor of meeting the Rain Master, I owe a debt, and I am profoundly grateful.”

Shi Qingxuan smiled. “Indeed. Even though there aren’t many who are acquainted with the Rain Master, those who are have never spoken a bad word. Well, except Pei Ming.”

“Is there a quarrel between them?” Xie Lian asked.

“Naturally. Anyone who’s hung around the Upper Court for so long has some sort of quarrel or collusion underfoot. Let me tell you, the Rain Master traumatized Pei Ming deeply.”

“Traumatized…?” Xie Lian wondered. He had always thought the Lord Rain Master was just someone who worked the fields.

“You know Pei Ming,” Shi Qingxuan said. “He’s got plenty of descendants, his grand-however-many-sons are everywhere. Before Little Pei, there used to be another Deputy God at the Palace of Ming Guang, and he was also a descendant who was first appointed as general, then ascended.”

Xie Lian was amazed. “General Pei sure has many talented descendants.”

Not just anyone could turn the art of ascension into an inherited family business.

Shi Qingxuan snapped her fan open and continued.

“He was indeed talented, but he was more or less the same as Pei Ming—powerful and packed with personal problems. That deputy official often stirred up trouble in other people’s domains, but no one dared say much because Pei Ming stood behind him. Until one day, he messed around in the vicinity of the former Kingdom of Yushi.

“Holed up deep in the mountains, the Lord Rain Master rarely ventures out and spends the days planting fields—hence that nickname ‘Old Farmer of the Deep Mountains, Rain Master Huang.’ But who would’ve thought? The moment the Rain Master emerged, that descendant of Pei Ming’s was beaten to a pulp. He was dragged back to the heavens, thrown in front of the Heavenly Emperor, and sentenced to exile.”

Why does this story sound so familiar? Xie Lian mused.

“At first Pei Ming thought, ‘Exile? Whatever. I’ll just fish him back up in a hundred years,’” Shi Qingxuan continued. “But how much can happen in the Mortal Realm in a century? Every year, every day even, new and impressive talents flare to life in a flurry. You can barely keep count. It only took ten years for that deputy official’s devotees to turn to a new god, and after fifty years, he was completely forgotten. So after a hundred years, he could no longer be recalled. That young heavenly official with a once-boundless future was no more, his talents wasted. It wasn’t until Little Pei came around that Pei Ming found another right hand he liked.”

No wonder General Pei was doing everything in his power to restore Little Pei’s position—with that precedent, he was afraid Little Pei would be ruined too. All the same, his methods couldn’t be considered correct.

Xie Lian mused upon it, then sighed. “The human world.”

Shi Qingxuan agreed. “Yeah, you’ll always wear down your spiritual power and will to fight if you dally too long in the Mortal Realm.”

The pair nodded to themselves. The difference, however, was that Xie Lian nodded unconsciously, whereas Shi Qingxuan was intentionally nodding in an exaggerated manner. After nodding that way for a while, Xie Lian abruptly remembered an incredibly important individual.

"Lang Ying! That child!" he exclaimed.

Too many things had happened all at once; the excitement had been too great, and he had forgotten all about the boy.

"Are you talking about the child you brought back from Paradise Manor?" Shi Qingxuan piped up. "The Heavenly Emperor has seen him, and he's currently at my place. I'll bring him down for you later."

There's still Qi Rong and another child locked up inside Puqi Shrine. I can't let anyone see them, Xie Lian thought. So he replied, "How can I trouble you with that? Why don't I go up instead?"

Shi Qingxuan nodded in delight. "Same difference! Incidentally, it'll be the Mid-Autumn Festival Banquet soon. It's a once-a-year event—you shouldn't miss it! This year my brother will be back for it too. I'll introduce you."

Xie Lian couldn't help but smile at her tone, which brimmed with pride over her elder brother. *The Mid-Autumn Festival Banquet, huh…*

Every year for the Mid-Autumn Festival, all of heaven held a banquet to celebrate. During the gathering, they gazed down on the Mortal Realm's festivities as entertainment. But besides that, a very important "game" occurred during the banquet, a sort of grand finale to the feast: the Battle of the Lanterns.

Not just anyone could offer a Blessings Lantern. During the Mid-Autumn Festival Banquet, what the gods "battled" over was the number of Blessings Lanterns their devotees offered at their main temple.

Everyone said, "It's only a game," "No need to take it seriously," "We're just playing around, don't mind it." But in reality, how many of them genuinely didn't care? They all pitted themselves against one another, hoping that this year, their devotees would fight hard for them. If there really was someone who didn't compete, it was Jun Wu. This was simply because the Palace of Divine Might always stood victorious, and its lanterns only increased year after year. Thus, Jun Wu was the only heavenly official who truly took this game as a game. As for the rest, they fought not for first place but for second, although even then the competition was fierce.

At the peak of the Palace of Xianle's prominence, it had also been incomparably impressive, standing far ahead of the pack alongside the Palace of Divine Might and leaving other heavenly officials in the dust. Now it'd probably look quite sad. Xie Lian didn't even need to guess exactly how many Blessings Lanterns he would receive: without a doubt, not a single one!

Even though he was sure to make a poor showing, it would still be better if he went. He wasn't like the Rain Master, who had been living as a recluse for centuries. He wasn't like the Earth Master, who had secret assignments to attend to. And he definitely wasn't like the Water Master, who could do whatever he wanted. If he was always a "special case" even though he wasn't anyone of significance—if he refused to attend simply because he didn't feel like it—then after a while, it would inspire resentment and there'd be talk. While Xie Lian thought nothing of gossip, it would only make things difficult for Jun Wu. And so, he accepted Shi Qingxuan's invitation then and there.

"All right. I'll definitely be there when the time comes."

In the days following, Xie Lian was unsuccessful in separating Qi Rong from the body he'd taken, even after trying all sorts of methods, and Qi Rong was growing quite pleased with himself. Thank goodness for Guzi, who didn't mind feeding his "dad," as Xie Lian really didn't feel like cramming things into Qi Rong's mouth day in and day out. On the day of the Mid-Autumn Festival, Xie Lian drew an array outside Puqi Shrine, locked the door from the outside, left Ruoye behind to keep Qi Rong bound, and reported to the Heavenly Capital.

They say in verse: "*White jade capital of the heavens, twelve towers, five cities. The immortal strokes my head, hair bound to receive longevity.*[5] The "white jade capital" was, of course, referring to the Heavenly Capital. In preparation for the Mid-Autumn Festival, the Heavenly Capital was wholly refreshed. Other than that, Xie Lian saw a marked increase in armed guards in the streets, corridors, and terraces; they had probably been assigned after Hua Cheng's intrusion. The outdoor banquet was arranged under the moon, and exquisite incense perfumed the propitious ambience.

Auspicious clouds drifted in the skies, and blossoms flurried like snow. It was a splendid setting for entertainment and moon watching.

When moon watching in the Mortal Realm, if one were to create a circle by touching one's thumb to their index finger, the moon could fit right in that frame. However, when moon watching in the heavens, the moon hung but a close distance away, looking as though it could be caught in only a few steps. It glistened white, like a giant jade screen. Truly an ethereal sight, impossible to behold in the Mortal Realm.

Needless to say, Jun Wu sat at the head of the banquet. However, there was a hidden, intricate stratagem to the rest of the seating, a method underlying the order and position. Taking a seat too close to the front was naturally a no-no, but no heavenly official wanted to be seated too far away either. Xie Lian didn't really care for such pedantic etiquette, but formal attire was another requirement at the Mid-Autumn Banquet—meaning, one had to dress to match the appearance of one's divine statue in the Mortal Realm. Xie Lian had not a single divine statue, so he simply wore his white Daoist robe with his bamboo hat hanging on his back. While a little shabby, he really didn't have anything better. Dressing this way was rather conspicuous, so he felt it'd be better to sit somewhere more hidden away.

Just as he found a random corner, he looked up and saw Feng Xin walking his way. Both of them hesitated for a moment before giving each other a slight nod as a greeting.

Feng Xin walked on for a few steps but then doubled back. "What are you doing sitting there?"

Xie Lian thought he had taken the wrong spot and stood. "I thought I could sit anywhere?"

Feng Xin was about to say something more when, far in the distance, Xie Lian saw Shi Qingxuan waving at him from the front of the banquet. Shi Qingxuan was in her female form at the moment, and when Feng Xin turned to look, it was like he had laid eyes on something that unearthed a past trauma. Aghast, he hurried away and left Xie Lian to his own devices.

Shi Qingxuan shouted, "Your Highness, over here!"

The Wind Master was prominently popular in the Upper Court, and thus, naturally, her seat was one of the best, located close to Jun Wu. This wave and call made many heavenly officials look over. Jun Wu had been sitting in silence with his hand supporting his cheek, but now he also noticed Xie Lian and inclined his head toward him. And so, Xie Lian had no choice but to go over.

On the way, he caught no glimpse of Lang Qianqiu, as expected. Apparently, Lang Qianqiu had long since declined his invitation to the Mid-Autumn Banquet in favor of searching for Qi Rong's whereabouts. Shi Qingxuan found Xie Lian a seat right next to her, a spot with excellent feng shui. Xie Lian didn't think it appropriate, but the Wind Master was warmly inviting and also already pushing him down to sit.

"I'll take you to the kid later, after the banquet is over," she said. "He's a little ugly, sure, but very obedient."

Hearing this, Xie Lian could only say his thanks. The one seated next to them was Ming Yi, who sullenly fiddled with a jade cup; the hand playing with that small vessel was surprisingly paler than the cup itself. The color of Ming Yi's face looked healthy enough, so it seemed the injuries he'd received during his imprisonment in Ghost City had healed.

"Lord Earth Master, I trust you've been well," Xie Lian greeted him.

Looking like he didn't want to talk, Ming Yi dipped his head. Shi Qingxuan, however, was the exact opposite. She knew everyone and could say a few words to anyone sitting to the front, back, left, right, and even those seated a million miles away. Xie Lian was in awe of how she remembered every heavenly official's name no matter their rank.

Seated next to Xie Lian was a young man of eighteen or nineteen; his nose was tall, his brows deep, and his raven hair slightly curly. Xie Lian didn't know him, and the young man didn't know Xie Lian, so they both felt a little lost as they stared at each other. The awkward staring contest ended after Xie Lian offered a random greeting. Looking around some more, it seemed that Feng Xin and Mu Qing had both taken seats that were as far from each other as possible.

Three heavenly officials were seated directly across from Xie Lian, and they carried on with what seemed to be a very friendly conversation.

On the left was a civil official dressed in black. He was easy and poised in his bearing, and proper and bright in his brow. His fingers gently tapped a regular rhythm on the table as he spoke. His demeanor was calm, at ease, and inexplicably familiar. In the middle was an official with whom Xie Lian was well acquainted, Pei Ming. On the right was a young master robed in white, who languidly fluttered the fan in his hand. The front side of the fan bore the word "shui" for water, and the back was painted with three wavy lines. His brows and eyes quite resembled Shi Qingxuan's, but his expression was one of scornful arrogance. On the surface he appeared to be a gentleman, but his eyes were quite clearly filled with disdain for everyone present. Who else could it be but the Water Tyrant?

Understanding dawned on Xie Lian: they were the Three Tumors.

That black-clad civil official had to be Ling Wen in her most powerful, masculine form, and in it she certainly looked impressively dignified. Those three doled out a colorful variety of praise, complimenting one another to the ends of the earth and heavens, to the point where Shi Qingxuan grumbled continuous complaints under her breath.

"Fake. So fake."

Xie Lian found it rather amusing, however. Just then, he noticed a small, beautiful pavilion with red stage curtains covering all four of its sides at the front of the banquet tables.

"What's that?"

Shi Qingxuan smiled. "Oh, you don't know? It's a really popular game in the Upper Court. Come, come, just watch, it's starting now!"

As soon as she spoke, the rumble of thunder rolled from beyond the skies. Jun Wu glanced up, then poured a cup of wine and passed it down. As the thunder growled overhead, the seated heavenly officials laughed and hollered, passing around that cup of wine.

"Don't give it to me! Don't give it to me!"

"Pass it to him!"

Xie Lian figured out the general rules by watching the others play. *So, it's Drummed Flower Passing.*

Trying their best to not spill a single drop, the crowd traded the cup of wine that Jun Wu had sent off. The wine could be given to anyone but could not be passed back to the same person. When the thunder stopped, whoever held the wine cup would be teased for fun…except Xie Lian didn't know what kind of *fun* awaited the holder of the cup. To Xie Lian, this game wasn't a friendly one. Passing the wine cup to someone could result in them becoming the recipient of ridicule, so most would choose to give it to people with whom they were friendly. But he wasn't close with most of the heavenly officials present, so how could he dare tease others so nonchalantly? At best, he could hand it to the Wind Master, but what if the Wind Master happened to be the one who handed the wine to him?

Best if no one passes it to me, Xie Lian thought. *But I might be thinking too highly of myself.*

The first round was over before he even finished the thought. As everyone had hoped, the wine stopped in Pei Ming's hand. It seemed Pei Ming was used to this, and he downed the cup in one gulp amidst roaring cheers. The officials clapped and hollered.

"Raise it! *Raise it!"*

In the thick of those cheers, that resplendent pavilion slowly raised its four curtains. Upon the platform stood a tall general, his head held high, his stride wide, cutting an exceedingly impressive figure. He didn't seem to notice the heavenly officials below, nor the strange, beautiful scenery beyond the pavilion. He took a few steps and started singing verses, sonorous and fervent.

As it turned out, whoever ended up with the wine cup would be treated to a performance: the pavilion brought forth a random play that had been written about that particular heavenly official in the Mortal Realm and showed it for all to see. Given humanity's deep and abiding love for fabricating wild stories, who knew what kind of outrageous play would be shown? Furthermore, one couldn't know when they'd be picked, so the game was just as thrilling as it was embarrassing.

However, this was also where the fun lay. It had to be said that every one of General Pei's plays were exhilarating simply because the female lead was different every time; sometimes it was a celestial fairy, sometimes a yao, sometimes an unmarried noble lady. Every female lead was more beautiful than the last, and every story more shameless. The heavenly officials watched with relish, eagerly waiting for the female lead to enter the scene. Sure enough, it didn't take long before a lady dressed in black stepped onto the stage, singing like a golden oriole. The two actors sang to each other, the lyrics brazenly flirtatious. The more the crowd watched, the more something didn't feel right, and they started murmuring amongst themselves.

"What's the name of this play?"

"Who's the woman the general is seducing this time?"

Just then, "General Pei" on the stage called out, "Noble Jie—"

Below the stage, both Pei Ming and Ling Wen spat their mouthfuls of wine.

Who else could "Noble Jie" be? "Ling Wen" was Ling Wen's heavenly title; her proper name was Nangong Jie. The heavenly officials were shocked—had those two really been tangled up in an affair at some point?!

Ling Wen wiped the corner of his lips with a napkin, then said dispassionately, "No need to think on it. It's a fabrication."

While the two in question were both a bit put out, they were fortunately thick-skinned enough. The play's leads continued to yowl to each other on stage, and the two below pretended not to see.

Shi Wudu wouldn't let them off the hook so easily, however. He smiled as he fluttered his fan.

"What an exciting play. Any thoughts, you two?"

"Not really," Ling Wen replied. "This play is old. My divine statues back then weren't like the ones I have now. It's only folklore. Think about it—in folklore, what woman hasn't Ol' Pei tried to seduce?"

Everyone agreed wholeheartedly.

Pei Ming spoke up in his own defense, "Hey, you can't say that. In folklore it's true that I've seduced pretty much everyone, but in this particular case I really haven't. Don't wrong the innocent."

"Well, folklore says I've seduced even more male officials, all told. You don't see *me* all fidgety, do you?" Ling Wen quipped.

Ling Wen had originally been brought to the heavens via appointment, and folklore claimed she'd accomplished this by seducing another heavenly official. This was also why, at the beginning, the Palace of Ling Wen had been cold and quiet with very few worshippers. During any period of particularly intense objection to her, she was cussed and cursed to the ends of the earth, and some would even throw menstrual linens and bralettes into her donation boxes. If any male officials were similarly whispered about, they'd simply be called "charming" and could take full pleasure in it. Although the situations were similar, the treatment of male and female officials clearly differed, and the consequences were quite different indeed.

As Xie Lian reflected on this, the next round began. Shi Wudu had laughed earlier, but this new round ended on him. In unison, the two Tumors next to him cupped their hands in a congratulatory gesture.

"Instant karma. Take it graciously."

Shi Wudu furrowed his brow for a brief instant, then drank the wine. Those curtains raised once more. Before the curtains had even reached the top, two long trills came from within:

"Wifeyyyyy—"

"Hubbyyyyy—"

Flourishing with affection, the tender voices were filled with sweet, intertwined yearning. Xie Lian witnessed with his own eyes how goosebumps sprouted over half of Shi Wudu and Shi Qingxuan's bodies.

Shi Qingxuan jumped to her feet. "Ge—! Hurry and cut it off!"

Shi Wudu immediately barked, "Drop the curtains! Drop them right now!"

Even without seeing anything, one could easily guess that this play was derived from the folklore that depicted Lord Water Master and Lady Wind Master as husband and wife. When people told stories, tales of love and hatred were always fan favorites. If either feeling was already present, good. If not, even better, because then one could make it all up. The myths that cleaved to orthodox worship of the gods generally consisted of whatever they had actually personally accomplished, but sometimes, when they saw what the mortals came up with for them, the gods had to hand it to people—those were the real *myths*.

The moment Shi Wudu gave the word, the curtains dropped with a conclusive swish. The heavenly officials in the audience all wanted to laugh but didn’t dare to, and they suffered as they held in their mirth.

On the other hand, Xie Lian simply smiled and said, “Lord Wind Master, I didn’t know you could call for the curtains to drop.”

Shi Qingxuan was still shaking from the trauma as she replied, “Yeah, it’s no big deal. Just donate a hundred thousand merits!”

“…”

Xie Lian sat speechless, and the third round began. This time, the thunder didn’t rumble for very long, and the wine cup ended up with the young man sitting next to Xie Lian.

Seeing this, the reaction from the crowd of heavenly officials was odd. It wasn’t enthusiastic, but it wasn’t indifferent; it was like they were very interested in seeing the play but didn’t want to be obvious about it. That young man didn’t seem too interested in the game, but he still drank the wine. He put down the cup, and the curtains raised once more.

Two stood upon that stage. One was a young general with curly hair like a stone lion’s mane, and although exceedingly exaggerated, he still looked heroically sprightly—so he was portraying this young heavenly official. The other one had pointy lips and sallow cheeks, and was the very image of a wretched clown as he jumped all over the stage. When the young man faced the other, the latter would act serious, if still clearly slimy and loathsome. When that young man turned around, the other would pull awful faces and backstab him with a sword. No doubt, this was the role of a despicable two-faced villain.

That clown performed with embellished vigor like it was a silly, comedic play. However, the reactions from the heavenly officials in the audience differed vastly. Xie Lian noticed that the officials in the lower ranks laughed uproariously, while higher-ranking officials like Shi Qingxuan and Shi Wudu frowned wordlessly, not thinking it the least bit amusing. At the same time, he also noticed veins popping on the fists of the young man beside him, and Xie Lian became alarmed. Although he didn’t understand the specifics of what was going on onstage, he easily grasped that it was mocking someone. Even if he didn’t know who was who, the leads’ performances were uncomfortable enough on their own.

Seeing that the young man was on the verge of throwing a fit, Xie Lian took a chopstick from the table and flung it at the rope controlling the curtains. The not-so-sharp chopstick brushed the rope and, surprisingly, slashed it. The curtains dropped noisily, and the officials cried out in shock.

“How can this be?!”

“What’s going on?!”

They all looked to Xie Lian, some even rising to their feet as they did. Xie Lian was about to open his mouth when something exploded next to his ear. It seemed that the young man had shattered the white jade wine cup in his fist.

That play had apparently provoked him, and he tossed away the shards of the jade cup in furious outrage. He sprang onto the table, pushed off with his feet, and barged into that pavilion through the curtains. A number of heavenly officials rushed over to lift the red curtains, but inside it was already empty. The crowd was in an uproar.

“Oh no, oh no, His Highness Qi Ying went down to beat people up again!”

Qi Ying? The Palace of Qi Ying? The Martial God of the West, Quan Yizhen? Xie Lian hurriedly asked Shi Qingxuan, “Lord Wind Master, what’s going on? What’s with His Highness Qi Ying ‘going down to beat people up again’?”

Shi Qingxuan snapped out of it and replied, “Beating people up is just…beating people up. Ahem. You might not believe it, but Qi Ying frequently beats up his own worshippers.”

“…”

Well, this was the first time Xie Lian had ever heard of a heavenly official who dared assault their own followers, since that was usually something that would destroy their image in a believer’s mind. He wanted to inquire further, but he heard a lower-ranked heavenly official a short distance away speak up in displeasure.

“That Quan really is too immature. Everyone was just having fun. Doesn’t he know to play along a little? Who hasn’t been picked on? Were

General Pei and Ling Wen-zhenjun not teased? Besides, he wasn’t even the one being mocked, so why is he so angry?”

“Yeah, he really thinks too highly of himself. Even if he’s mad, there’s no need to have a fit right this second! This banquet is meant to be fun. No one’s here to watch him throw tantrums! Really…”

“All right, all right, a brat is a brat. He’s not here anymore; it’ll be more fun without him, anyway.”

Xie Lian listened to them talk and mulled over their words. The feast was only temporarily disrupted, and Ling Wen seemed to have already sent someone to take care of Quan Yizhen’s present engagement. After some officials came out and pacified the crowd, the banquet and games resumed. Thus, the thunder rumbled and the fourth round of Drummed Flower Passing began.

Xie Lian just watched the others play the game at first; he couldn’t blend in and was just happy that no one bothered him. Unexpectedly, just as he was about to chat with Shi Qingxuan, a hand suddenly extended and passed him that white jade wine cup.

Chapter 42:
Temple of a Thousand Lights Endlessly Illuminating the Lingering Night

XIE LIAN NEVER IMAGINED ANYONE would actually pass the wine cup to him.

Unfortunately, he reacted too fast and took the cup without thinking, but the moment he did, he froze. However, when he looked to see who had handed him the cup, the other party was also dumbfounded—it was Ming Yi.

As it turned out, when the wine cup previously found itself in Shi Qingxuan's hand, Shi Qingxuan had thought it'd be funny to give it to Ming Yi. However, Ming Yi had been quite busy stuffing his face and drinking his own wine, and hadn't even bothered to look up before passing the wine cup in a random direction. Only after the cup had been delivered did he realize what had happened and was struck speechless. At that exact moment, the thunder stopped rumbling, leaving Xie Lian and Ming Yi staring blankly at each other.

Although the one who received the wine cup was Xie Lian, everyone's gaze moved to Feng Xin and Mu Qing. It wasn't hard to understand why; Xie Lian had not been mentioned or heard of for eight hundred years. Eight hundred years ago, there naturally would have been plenty of plays depicting his heroism, but those plays had long since been lost to time. Besides, no one would pick such an auspicious day to set up a stage and perform just for Xie Lian. And so, it followed that if they had to find a play with a role for the "Crown Prince of Xianle," it would have to be one starring either Feng Xin or Mu Qing.

In Mortal Realm plays written for those two heavenly officials, at times the story would involve Xie Lian—usually as a foil or an extra, or for the sake of making the play even more exciting. Some would rewrite Xie Lian as the villain, spinning stories depicting the lonely, abandoned Mu Qing being bullied, or Xie Lian robbing Feng Xin of his beloved, and so on. If such plays were shown at the Mid-Autumn Banquet, whether the officials in question would be pleased was hardly a concern, since the rest of the audience would definitely enjoy it. Xie Lian held that small jade cup in his hand, and some heavenly officials were already urging him:

“Your Highness, come, come, come, down the cup!”

A few joined in the pestering, and Feng Xin spoke from his spot far away.

“His Highness can’t drink.”

“Just one cup! It won’t do anything,” the crowd urged.

Jun Wu had not said a word throughout the performances, simply sitting with his hand supporting his temple. Now he also straightened as if to speak.

Beside Xie Lian, Shi Qingxuan asked, “Can you do it? If not, then whatever, I’ll help you throw the hundred thousand merits to drop the curtains.”

“…”

Xie Lian was afraid she really would throw away a hundred thousand merits on impulse. No matter how generous she was, that wasn’t the way to go about things. Besides, he’d seen pretty much every play there was, and there wasn’t anything worth paying attention to.

He hastily replied, “No, no, a cup shouldn’t be a problem.”

Then Xie Lian emptied the cup. Fine brew flowed down his throat, leaving in its wake a path that was first cool, then hot. He felt a little dizzy, but the taste of that refined drink pushed down the dizziness in an instant. The curtains around the pavilion slowly lifted, and the crowd moved their attention there, ready to focus on the play. They were amazed by what they saw.

Two figures stood onstage. One was dressed in white with a bamboo hat on his back, looking windswept and dusty, with a face as fair as powder—this was no doubt Xie Lian. The other was dressed in red, his ebony hair as black as ink. He had a handsome face and a lithe form, and his eyes were bright and charming. A snake was wrapped around his arm, which “Xie Lian” stripped away—however, that red-robed man snatched the snake back in a flash before tossing it aside. He then clutched “Xie Lian’s” hand with no intent of letting go. This scene made Xie Lian feel like he'd been violently stabbed by a knife to the heart.

The heavenly officials had been eager to watch a good show, and they were astonished. Of course, Xie Lian himself was also flabbergasted. Jun Wu chuckled from his spot at the head of the banquet.

"What play is this? Seems it has never been performed before."

Ling Wen immediately sent for someone to investigate, then gave his report. "It appears this play is called *Adventures in the Kingdom of Banyue*. It's newly written, so it's indeed never been shown before. Tonight is its debut performance in the Mortal Realm."

Shi Qingxuan turned to Xie Lian. "It was probably written by those merchants we met, after they returned from the Kingdom of Banyue. There'll be no need to pull the curtains. We've saved ourselves some merits."

Xie Lian didn't comment. Those merchants were the only mortals who knew of the incident in the Kingdom of Banyue, so only they could be behind this play. He recalled a boy named Tian Sheng in that caravan, who had indeed said something along the lines of worshipping Xie Lian as thanks—perhaps he had commissioned this play? However, Xie Lian hadn't told Tian Sheng his name, and a young boy couldn't have arranged something like this.

Although the heavenly officials weren't watching the play they expected, the performance before them was even more exciting. After all, if the rumors were true, then the role that red-robed man was playing was none other than Hua Cheng!

There were plenty of plays about Crimson Rain Sought Flower in the Mortal Realm, but they were usually titled something like *The Red Demon Torched the Temples of Thirty-Three Gods and the Heavens Could Do Fuck-all About It*, or *Crimson Rain Sought Flower Strung Up the Martial and Civil Gods and Slapped Them Around With But One Hand*, and so on—the kind of stories that would make those in the heavens cry silent tears, with zero desire to find out how they ended. In any case, the protagonist this time was Xie Lian. The officials present felt like he'd never fit in and could hardly be truly counted as one of their own, so watching this play did no harm. Besides, the staging was intricate, the production exquisite, the actors extremely well made-up—truly, it was a great piece of painstaking effort. Many secretly enjoyed the show in all sincerity, and they provided running commentary as they watched.

“Is that true? That must be made up; Hua Cheng would never talk like that to anyone!”

“Nonsense! Pure nonsense!”

“Who does this play take Hua Cheng for?! Wake up! This isn’t a romantic drama—goodness, how daring!”

As this was, in the end, a play written just for Xie Lian, he watched it attentively. If he had to provide an earnest review, it wasn’t bad. The actors looked good, the story was good… Just, as one of the characters being portrayed, he had a teeny tiny criticism: the two protagonists seemed overly familiar with each other.

The one who played Xie Lian was a really talented actor, but every time he opened his mouth to call for “San Lang,” although the tone didn’t rise up and down or brim with yearning, Xie Lian thought it was somehow even more unsettling than when “Lady Wind Master” had called “Lord Water Master” her “hubbyyyyy” earlier that night. Also, there seemed to be too many little gestures: the actors were always hooking arms, hugging shoulders, and embracing each other. Somehow, something wasn’t right about it.

But if Xie Lian really thought about it…when he called for San Lang, that was indeed the tone he always used, and all those intimate gestures really did seem faithful to the source material as well. He hadn’t thought there was anything wrong with it at the time, and watching it now, technically there still wasn’t anything wrong. If he looked at the other heavenly officials, although their lips condemned the show as nonsense, they seemed to be fully enjoying it and watched with rapt attention and enthusiastic interest. And so, Xie Lian kept his mouth shut.

As they watched, Shi Wudu suddenly spoke up, “Who are those two servant boys in the back?”

At the words “servant boys,” both Feng Xin and Mu Qing imperceptibly froze for a moment.

“They’re not servant boys,” Ling Wen replied. “Those should be two junior martial officials from the Middle Court. They were appointed by the Palaces of Nan Yang and Xuan Zhen to assist in His Highness’s emergency request.”

That the Palaces of Nan Yang and Xuan Zhen had actually sent people to assist Xie Lian was truly extraordinary news, as impossible to imagine as Pei Ming courteously rejecting the advances of a peerless beauty, and all the heavenly officials turned to look.

Ling Wen added, “They went voluntarily.”

Xie Lian smiled. “I forgot to ask—how are Nan Feng and Fu Yao? Why didn’t I see them come out to play today?”

“Nan Feng…is…” Feng Xin said.

Mu Qing replied evenly, “Fu Yao is in detention.”

Feng Xin replied as well, “Nan Feng is also in detention.”

Xie Lian made a neutral noise. “Both of them are locked up?” he commented. “What a shame.”

While they conversed, the curtains dropped on that exhilarating play. Although all present determined that it had been written by an ignorant believer with indecent fantasies, watching an obscene Hua Cheng was still fully entertaining, and the crowd cheered and applauded. However, Pei Xiu had been exiled because of what happened at the Banyue Pass, so everyone still had to mind Pei Ming after the entertainment ended.

“How’s your Little Pei doing, General Pei?” Shi Wudu inquired.

Pei Ming poured himself a cup and drank, shaking his head. “How well can he do? His heart isn’t in the right place. I don’t care anymore.”

Shi Qingxuan couldn’t listen further. “So in General Pei’s opinion, where’s the right place for his heart?” she scoffed. “Your Little Pei’s future is a future, but the little missy’s future is nothing?”

Her tone was impudent, and Shi Wudu’s sharp gaze swept over.

“Qingxuan, mind your manners!”

The moment he reprimanded her, Shi Qingxuan lowered her head, shamefaced.

Pei Ming laughed at the sight of this.

“Water Master-xiong, your little brother is quite the force to be reckoned with. Only you can keep him in line. It isn’t really anything to worry about if he messes with me, but if he messes with the wrong people, they won’t let it go so easily for your sake.”

Shi Wudu opened his fan and continued to lecture his younger sibling. “Did you hear what General Pei said? And how many times do I have to tell you not to walk around in that form all the time? What a disgrace. I don’t care what appearance you prefer; you must use your true form when you’re out!”

Although Shi Qingxuan loved her lady form passionately and wouldn’t stand for such outrageous demands, she still didn’t dare offend her brother.

Xie Lian thought, *The Wind Master says she’s not afraid of her older brother, but that doesn’t seem to be entirely true.*

Yet unexpectedly, Shi Wudu ended the lecture with: “What if you encounter someone with wicked intent who’s strong in spiritual power, like General Pei?!”

Ling Wen laughed unkindly, and Pei Ming nearly spat out his wine again.

“Water Master-xiong! If you keep that up, we can’t be pals anymore.”

After the feasting was over, amidst the clinking cups, it came time at last for the final act of the night: the Battle of the Lanterns.

Every candle and lamp within the Heavenly Capital was extinguished, and all was dim except for the light of the moon. The banquet was set up near a lake, and when the clouds and mist on the surface were waved away, the deep darkness of the Mortal Realm could be seen through the clear waters.

The Battle of the Lanterns was a competition to see which heavenly official was offered the greatest number of Blessings Lanterns from their largest, most renowned temple. One Blessings Lantern of Everlasting Light was hard to buy even with a thousand gold, and they could not easily be extinguished. The order of the Battle of the Lanterns was called from lowest to highest, and when it was an official's turn, the lanterns offered by their worshippers floated past the heavenly banquet to brighten the long, dark night in an incomparably enchanting display.

The Palace of Divine Might had nine-hundred and sixty-one lanterns this year—a count close to a thousand, and a number that had never before been reached in heavenly history. The heavenly officials felt that next year, the count would surely break a thousand, but that wasn't the point. If first place was always first place, then first place lost meaning, so the Palace of Divine Might was automatically discounted from the running when it came to the battle.

The moment the Battle of the Lanterns began, the first one up was the Rain Master, and the lantern tally was both funny and embarrassing. When Xie Lian saw that one little errant Blessings Lantern floating leisurely to the sky and heard, "The Palace of the Rain Master, one lantern!" he almost suspected he *had* become drunk and hadn't yet sobered up. There was no way it could be only one lantern.

To make sure he wasn't impaired, he asked Shi Qingxuan, "Is that correct?"

"It is," Shi Qingxuan replied. "It really is just that one. And that one was lit by the bull from the Rain Master's own house for the sake of showing face at the feast."

Self-offering; what an endearing sentiment. Xie Lian pondered for a moment. The Rain Master controlled rain and was thus the god of agriculture. He guessed aloud, "Is it because the worshippers of the Rain Master are mostly farmers, so they don't have the funds for offerings?"

"Your Highness, do you have some kind of misunderstanding about farmers?" Shi Qingxuan asked. "A lot of farmers are wealthy, okay? It's only because the Lord Rain Master has always told them it's better to work the fields than to use money for offerings, so those followers always offer fresh fruits and vegetables instead."

Xie Lian was extremely envious when he heard this. *What a marvelous thing,* he thought.

Shi Qingxuan continued, "And then later the Lord Rain Master also said not to waste anything, so usually after a couple days, the worshippers take home the offerings to eat themselves."

"…"

At the beginning of the battle, the numbers were scattered and sparse, and the lights belonging to the lower-ranked officials went from a few to a few dozen. It attracted very little interest from the crowd. But as the battle continued, the brighter the rising lanterns shined and the more attention everyone paid. If not for the dedicated heavenly official who tallied and announced the numbers, it would be impossible to count the densely packed lanterns floating up. Xie Lian didn't at all understand what was going on, so he didn't comment on anything, instead listening to everyone else's analysis of how the competition was going while admiring the beautiful scene of lanterns illuminating the long black night—although personally, he didn't think there was really anything to analyze.

After about two incense time, they'd finally come to the grand finale. The fight for top ten in the Battle of the Lanterns at the Mid-Autumn Festival had begun.

At the bottom of the top ten, Xie Lian heard the announcer official shout:

"The palace of Qi Ying, four hundred and twenty-one lanterns!"

Quan Yizhen had long since left the feast, so the other officials didn't bother to hide the clicking of their tongues when they heard the count. The Martial God of the West was young, but his headwind was strong. Two hundred Blessings Lanterns was plenty to other officials who had around the same amount of experience, yet he had more than double that count. Even Lang Qianqiu, who had ascended earlier, didn't have as many lanterns, so Quan Yizhen was indeed impressive. However, Xie Lian felt that the young man wasn't really that well received in the heavens. Other than himself and Shi Qingxuan, practically no one else was sincerely awed by the number.

Next up, the Palace of the Earth Master, four hundred and forty-four lanterns. Other than taking the opportunity to slurp down two more spoonfuls of soup, Ming Yi had no further reaction to the news. Shi Qingxuan was more excited than he was, repeatedly proclaiming "Too few, too few." Because no one else was close with the Lord Earth Master, they only clapped politely in congratulations. Soon after, it was Shi Qingxuan herself—the Palace of the Wind Master, five hundred and twenty-three lanterns.

A person's popularity is something plainly evident. When the lantern count for the Palace of the Wind Master was announced, Shi Qingxuan hadn't even said anything before applause from the banquet roared, with hollers and cheers of "Congratulations!" and "As expected!" everywhere.

Shi Qingxuan was quite proud, standing up to cup her hands at the crowd before she gleefully shouted to Shi Wudu, "Ge! I'm eighth this year!"

She was acting like a child begging her parents for a reward after having been praised by her teacher, and Xie Lian couldn't help but smile.

However, Shi Wudu sharply scolded her, "Only eighth? What's there to be happy about?!"

His words were actually quite presumptuous. In the Upper Court, no one was a nobody, yet ranking as high as eighth overall with five hundred Blessings Lanterns became nothing more than "only eighth" from his lips. So didn't that mean the ones who ranked lower than eighth were even more worthless? It wasn't like he didn't understand his words were arrogant; he said them simply because he was unafraid. Shi Qingxuan's expression slumped.

Shi Wudu fluttered his fan and added, with great difficulty, "Even so, there are more lanterns than last year. Next year must be better as well."

Hearing this, Shi Qingxuan smiled and laughed again. At the banquet, only Ming Yi didn't cheer for her, as he was wholly occupied with stuffing his face. Shi Qingxuan smacked him a couple times, insisting upon some congratulations, but Ming Yi ignored her completely and continued to devour his food. Shi Qingxuan was outraged and demanded once more that he applaud her, and next to them, Xie Lian laughed so hard that he lost his breath.

Next, the Palace of Ling Wen, five hundred and thirty-six lanterns.

Among the civil gods, Ling Wen was considered number one. However, not too many civil gods congratulated him—instead it was the martial gods who sent their regards. Xie Lian congratulated him from afar, and Shi Wudu and Pei Ming demanded that Ling Wen hold a celebratory feast. Grumbles from other heavenly officials could be heard all around. There were complaints that Ling Wen only had so many worshippers because she used a male form. There was griping that Ling Wen had no time for other civil gods while she curried the favor of the more popular martial gods. There were comments that Ling Wen had snatched this rank only because she held the most feasts, and that there were prostitutes at those feasts, et cetera, et cetera. Xie Lian shook his head and had only one thing to say: it really wasn't easy being a female official.

Following Ling Wen were the Palaces of Nan Yang and Xuan Zhen, counted at five hundred seventy-two and five hundred seventy-three. Mu Qing looked relaxed and pleased, while Feng Xin appeared neither happy nor angry, and seemingly didn't care. Xie Lian was mystified; how had the count come so close? That was surely too near to be a coincidence. He asked Shi Qingxuan in a hushed voice, and as it turned out, the close count was indeed a matter of similarity. The two of them had similar backgrounds, similar might, territories right next to each other's, and an unfriendly relationship on top of all that. Worshippers on both sides fought to win specifically against the other, vowing that however many lanterns the other side offered, they would offer just one more. They didn't ask to be number one, just better than the other side. They put everything they had into achieving this goal, and every year there'd be a victorious side and a defeated one. This year, the Palace of Xuan Zhen squeezed out one more lantern at the very last second, narrowly winning against the Palace of Nan Yang. The worshippers looked like they had won a battle and were celebrating wildly.

Hearing this, Xie Lian couldn't help but think: *Rather than fighting each other to the death outside, shouldn't those people be home to celebrate the holiday? It's the Mid-Autumn Festival! A time for family reunions!*

Next, the Palace of Ming Guang, five hundred and eighty lanterns.

That was an impressive number, yet Pei Ming still didn't look pleased. The number of Blessings Lanterns that the Palace of Ming Guang had received was actually lower than the year before. It was a shock for something to have happened to Deputy General Pei Xiu, and they had lost almost a hundred lanterns for it. If it weren't for Pei Ming's strong base, he might have lost even more. Neither Shi Wudu nor Ling Wen congratulated him, only patted his shoulders.

Up until this point, Xie Lian noticed that the Blessings Lantern tallies were all very close together; only separated by tens and twenties, with no single heavenly official really standing out. This meant that in truth everyone was pretty much the same, and no one was really winning. He was just thinking this when the announcer shouted once more.

"The palace of the Water Master, seven hundred and eighteen lanterns!"

The banquet was in an uproar, awash with the sound of amazement.

Once the heavenly officials came to their senses, they fought each other to send forth their congratulations. Shi Wudu only sat there and didn't rise to receive the accolades; he didn't look particularly haughty and seemed to consider this all perfectly natural. He was probably only the second heavenly official in centuries to even come close to the Palace of Divine Might's count. The first time Xie Lian ascended had been too long ago, and Blessings Lanterns back then had been even harder to come by, so it couldn't compare. However, as the saying went: "Men die for wealth, birds die for food." Humanity's passionate love for money would never lessen, and this performance was as expected for the God of Wealth!

Shi Qingxuan was more excited than if she herself had received seven hundred lanterns, and she applauded with force, shouting to Xie Lian, "That's my brother! That's my brother!"

Xie Lian laughed. "I know, that's your brother!"

At the banquet, it was only Ming Yi, all by his lonesome, who was still working hard at eating. Honestly, Xie Lian thought that out of everyone present, only he treated the "feast" seriously for what it was. It seemed he'd attended specifically for the food, as though he'd been starved while playing the part of a spy in Ghost City and was working tonight to refill his stomach to the brim. When Xie Lian thought back to the street food sold at the Ghost City stalls, he understood wholeheartedly. He couldn't help but wonder: Did Hua Cheng ever stroll through the Ghost City streets, every now and then?

The night's most thrilling mystery had now been solved. Tonight, each heavenly official had socialized and watched plays to their hearts' content, and they rose to their feet satisfied and ready to take their leave.

“Wait.” Shi Wudu snapped his fan shut, a sudden crease forming between his brows.

If anyone else were to say “wait,” it probably wouldn’t have been as effective. However, Shi Wudu was known as the Water Tyrant for a reason. As if he had been born to give commands, the moment he opened his mouth, others unconsciously obeyed. Everyone sat back down in their seats, confused.

“The top ten are out; does the Lord Water Master have anything else to add?”

Is he going to give out merits too? Xie Lian wondered.

“The top *ten* are out?” Shi Wudu dryly asked as he flitted his fan.

No one knew what he meant except Shi Qingxuan, who suddenly cried out in shock.

“No… No, no, no! The top ten aren’t all out! Even if we count the Palace of Divine Might, only nine have been announced so far!”

Everyone was stunned, and they soon started wondering aloud.

“Only nine?”

“It’s true, I counted, there really were only nine!”

“Someone else is ranked higher than Lord Water Master?!”

“What?! Who can it be? I don’t know anyone like that!”

Just then, a white light as bright as day exploded across the black night.

That light was from lanterns.

Like thousands upon millions of fish swimming through gorges to the sea, countless lanterns slowly floated up.

They shimmered and gleamed in the dark night, radiant and brilliant, like floating souls in a magnificent dream. It was exceedingly beautiful, brightening the blackened Mortal Realm. In the face of such a striking sight, none could speak. All held their breath, and their words lay broken in their mouths.

Xie Lian watched that sky full of lanterns in dumbfounded awe. It was like his own breathing had stopped and he could hear nothing at all, and he remained dazed for a long while. It was only after some time that he realized something was wrong.

The eyes of every heavenly official at the banquet were on Xie Lian. The announcer official had raised his quivering hand and pointed at him.

Bewildered, Xie Lian asked, “What is it?”

No one answered.

Xie Lian pointed to himself.

“…Me?”

Next to him, Shi Qingxuan slapped his shoulder. “Yes. You.”

“…” Xie Lian was still in shock. “Me what? What about me?”

That announcer swallowed a few times with difficulty and finally spoke again. The hundreds of heavenly officials present heard the tally from a voice that trembled with disbelief:

“Thousand Lights Temple, the Palace of the Crown Prince, three… Three…

“Three *thousand* lanterns!”

Three thousand lanterns!

All was silent. Then suddenly there was an uproar like a tidal wave.

Never had anyone won three thousand lanterns in a single night at the Mid-Autumn Festival Banquet, not even the Palace of Divine Might, which always sat at the head, as solid as the mountains. In fact, no one could ever have imagined such a number. Even one thousand was difficult to pass. Three thousand! That was truly unheard of, without a single precedent in all of history. It was more than all the other top ten heavenly officials combined!

One can imagine just how incredulous every official was at that moment, and some even blurted out:

“That has to be a mistake!”

“They must’ve miscounted…”

Aside from the ridiculous idea that the announcer official, who had been counting for the Mid-Autumn Festival’s Battle of the Lanterns for years, could’ve coincidentally miscounted tonight, the sight of that massive band of flowing lights alone proved the tally couldn’t be wrong—and even if that number was wrong, it could only be an underestimation.

Thus, another heavenly official hazarded, “Could it be that those aren’t real Blessings Lanterns? Maybe they’re the ordinary sort?”

That basically meant “It’s fraud!” A few agreed.

However, Shi Qingxuan shot down such talk.

“How could they be ordinary lanterns? Ordinary lanterns and Blessings Lanterns are of completely different make! And ordinary lanterns can’t fly up to the heavens, so how could these be counterfeits?”

If Xie Lian had argued, the officials would probably have continued to doubt. However, because it was Shi Qingxuan who spoke up and Shi Wudu was also present, no one dared say much else. Hitting a dead end, they changed tack.

“Everyone, where is this Thousand Lights Temple? When was it built? Who built it? Does any heavenly colleague know?”

The announcer official replied, “No…but ‘Thousand Lights Temple’ was clearly written on the lanterns that floated up.”

“But I’ve never heard of any Thousand Lights Temple!”

“Yeah, me neither!”

Xie Lian finally snapped out of his shocked reverie when he heard these complaints, and he said quite earnestly, “Everyone, truth be told, not only have none of you ever heard of it, I haven’t heard of it either.”

Surely there was no way Tian Sheng could have constructed it too?!

All the officials present lost their minds, destroyed by this unexpected thunder, incredulous and disbelieving, their tongues spitting with speculation.

Xie Lian really wanted to say, *“It’s only a game, why is everyone taking it so seriously?”* But first, very few took this “game” as a game, and second, he had ranked first place in this “game,” so if he said anything, he’d be asking for it. The other heavenly officials couldn’t say anything either; they hadn’t taken the winning spot, so if *they* said anything, it’d be as if they were trying to downplay not placing first. It was all exceedingly awkward.

Just then, Pei Ming chuckled. “I did say that Crimson Rain Sought Flower didn’t kidnap His Highness out of ill intent, but no one believed me. Will you finally believe me now?”

His reminder enlightened the crowd with a startling epiphany.

If this was Hua Cheng’s doing, then it wasn’t impossible—it would be a simple feat for him to light three thousand Blessings Lanterns like it was nothing!

Whether anything was going on between Xie Lian and Hua Cheng was a true mystery, as was the nature of their relationship. Before this, the majority had thought it was more believable to say that Hua Cheng kidnapped Xie Lian with nefarious intent. After all, there was no reason for Hua Cheng, who had always been unfriendly toward the heavens, to suddenly treat Xie Lian differently. However, there was also no reason to suspect that *this* show of courtesy was insincere, since it was so at odds with Hua Cheng’s usual wild lawlessness. After this Mid-Autumn Festival Banquet, one would be hard-pressed to say Hua Cheng harbored malevolence toward Xie Lian—three thousand Blessings Lanterns! Even for the Water Master, who controlled wealth, that wasn’t something one could pull off just because they felt like it.

Amidst the chaos, the sound of steady clapping suddenly came from the head of the feast. The officials looked to the sound and saw Jun Wu slowly applauding as he smiled at Xie Lian.

"Congratulations, Xianle."

Xie Lian knew Jun Wu intended to take the heat off him and was grateful for it. He bowed his head.

Jun Wu sighed in awe. "You always manage to create miracles."

Seeing that exchange, the feast quieted. After some hesitation, the crowd finally took Jun Wu's lead and clapped, their applause uneven as they sent their congratulations.

No matter how shocked they were, by that point the heavenly officials had to admit that This Highness the Crown Prince always produced rare phenomena. It was as such back then, and it was most certainly the case now!

The Mid-Autumn Festival Banquet had ended, and the relentlessly rumbling Thunder Master had also packed up. The one who cheered the hardest throughout it all was of course Shi Qingxuan; no matter whose ranking rolled out when, she would be the first to applaud—except for Pei Ming, of course. At first, Xie Lian wondered if stealing the Water Master's thunder and bumping him from second place to third would provoke his ire, but Shi Wudu didn't seem upset. Pei Ming and Ling Wen both congratulated him, and afterward the trio started discussing whose mountain hot springs would be best suited for a relaxing spa day and tui na massage.

Hearing them, Shi Qingxuan asked, "Ge, you're all going out to play again?"

Shi Wudu folded his fan. "Mm-hmm."

Ling Wen crossed his arms and chuckled. "Lord Wind Master, want to come along?"

"No, I've already made plans with people," Shi Qingxuan replied.

Shi Wudu frowned. "I hope it's not with anyone unsavory."

"Is there anyone more unsavory than General Pei?" Ling Wen quipped.

"Better shut up now, Noble Jie," Pei Ming warned.

Xie Lian waited until the two siblings spoke a few more words to each other, then prepared to leave the banquet with Shi Qingxuan. On the way out, they bumped into Mu Qing. It wasn't clear whether he'd been watching Xie Lian, but he certainly didn't look so pleased anymore. Feng Xin, however, was the exact opposite. When he rose to leave the feast, he called to Xie Lian.

"Congratulations."

Xie Lian nodded to him. "Thanks."

Lang Ying was settled in the Palace of the Wind Master in the Heavenly Capital. The boy had been cleaned up, but he was still rather shy. When Xie Lian picked him up and descended, the boy didn't talk much on the road. Xie Lian first went into town to buy some fresh fruit for him to eat, but he didn't immediately return to Puqi Village. Instead, he first went into a patch of nearby woods.

This forest was quite lively. A bare-chested young man was hung upside down by a white silk band. Profanities and vulgarities spilled from his mouth, and a little child squatted under him slapping away mosquitos. Xie Lian had Lang Ying stand outside the clearing, then strolled leisurely over. When that young man saw him, he raged.

"XIE LIAN, YOU PIECE OF SHIT, FUCKING LET ME DOWN THIS INSTANT! I'M GONNA DIE, I'M GONNA DIE, I'M GONNA DIE!"

Xie Lian, however, said warmly, "It must be years since you last got bit by mosquitos. Is it so bad to have a taste of being alive again?"

That young man was indeed Qi Rong. Xie Lian had expected him to misbehave, and that he'd surely try to goad Guzi into cutting Ruoye, so Xie Lian had instructed Ruoye thusly: should Qi Rong try to escape, drag him to these woods and have *fun*. Qi Rong was using another's flesh as a shield against Xie Lian, so Xie Lian couldn't beat him to a pulp very often—however, he could still make that flesh suffer petty pains of other sorts. Xie Lian had chopped firewood and scavenged in this area, and he himself had suffered being bitten to bits by mosquitos. It seemed Qi Rong was also presently bitten all over, and he looked more miserable than a dying man as he cussed loudly.

“WHERE’S YOUR SNOW-WHITE LOTUS HEART?! WHY CAN’T YOU PRETEND TO BE A SICKENINGLY SWEET GOOD PERSON NOW?!”

Guzi hugged Xie Lian’s leg and wailed. “Da-gege, please let my dad down! He’s been hanging for so long!”

Xie Lian petted Guzi’s head. Immediately after, Qi Rong yelped as he fell to the ground in a heap.

To return to Puqi Village, they had to traverse a maple grove. Xie Lian dragged along a bare-chested young man spewing curses, and following behind him were two children, one crying and sobbing, the other sullen and quiet.

What an odd group we make, Xie Lian thought.

As they hiked up the hills, he cautioned the two little ones behind him, “Watch your step. It’s easy to trip here.”

That was the truth. When Xie Lian walked this path at night, late in returning from town after collecting scraps, he always tripped or tumbled. Maybe it was just his luck.

Hearing this, Qi Rong immediately cried, “DEAR GOD! PLEASE MAKE THIS PERSON TRIP TO HIS DEATH, RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW!”

Xie Lian found that hilarious. “What’s a ghost like you doing begging the heavens for anything?”

Just then, a warm glow faintly emerged from the far distance. The path, once dark and obscured, was now illuminated, and the road brightened. When Xie Lian looked up, sure enough, it wasn’t just his imagination. There really was light on the horizon.

It was the light from those three thousand Blessings Lanterns of Everlasting Light.

The lanterns floated majestically in the night sky, overcoming the shine of the stars and the moon. Xie Lian watched, spellbound. After a moment, he breathed out a whisper:

“Thank you…”

Qi Rong didn’t know what any of this was about and snickered at him. “Why the fucking thanks? Other people are just playing around; they’re not lit for you. Stop thinking so highly of yourself.”

Xie Lian grinned but didn’t say anything, and didn’t rebuke him either. He only said, “That beauty exists in this world is, in itself, something to be grateful for.”

There was beauty in his heart, and he wasn’t afraid of killjoys. Borrowing the light of those distant lanterns, Xie Lian continued forward.

Chapter 43:
Pregnant with Evil, a New Unforeseen Disturbance

IT DIDN'T TAKE MORE THAN TWO DAYS before Xie Lian came to face a major crisis:

There was nothing to eat in the shrine.

If he was by himself, he'd only need a few steamed buns and a small plate of pickled vegetables for a whole day's sustenance. Maybe pick some cucumbers from the fields to munch on, and he'd be perfectly taken care of. The Puqi villagers provided offerings that were more than sufficient to take care of his daily needs. But now there were three more mouths to feed at the shrine, and between two live humans and a ghost, it didn't take long before they cleaned him out of rations.

The two children were all right, at least. That damned devil Qi Rong was possessing the body of a full-grown man and refusing to come out. He constantly cussed at Xie Lian for feeding him shitty food, but he also ate more than anyone else. Xie Lian dearly wanted to stuff his face with stove ash.

Once his stores had been completely depleted, Xie Lian decided to take the two little ones out to walk around the markets to see if they could collect some scraps, then find the children a good meal.

It bears repeating that Xie Lian's luck was usually bad, but today he had it particularly hard. After walking all through town, he surprisingly found not a single scrap to be collected. Finally, he stood at a crowded intersection and made a decision: he would pick up his old line of work.

Thus, he ushered the two children aside before he stood in the middle of the intersection and called to the crowd in a loud and resonant voice.

"Dear friends and neighbors! Today is the first time this humble one has found himself in this fair land. I will perform a few shameful tricks; they are embarrassing, but I hope everyone will cut me some slack and give this poor man a hand, donate a bite to eat, and grant him some coins for the road…"

Xie Lian had a transcendent air—his sleeves were clean and graceful, his voice was clear and sonorous, and his energy was infectious and invigorating. Many idling on the streets soon came over to surround him.

“What can you do? Show us something interesting.”

“How about plate spinning?” Xie Lian offered cheerfully.

The crowd waved their hands. “That’s not hard at all, it’s child’s play! What else can you do?”

Xie Lian then offered, “How about shattering boulders on my chest?”

“That’s too old school, too old!” the crowd groused. “Anything else?”

Only then did Xie Lian come to realize that even street performers needed to keep up with the times. What had once been his best tricks were now nothing more than yesterday’s news, and there were none left who appreciated his craft. The crowd was about to disperse, and without any other choice, he brought out his ultimate technique—he pulled from his sleeves a bundle of protection charms he had crafted with his own hands and called out again.

“Free protection charms for watching the performance! They’re handmade, don’t walk by and miss this chance!”

Hearing that there were freebies, the crowd soon returned.

“What kind of protection charms? Which temple blessed them? Is it the Heavenly Emperor?”

“Do you have any for wealth? Give me a wealth charm please, thanks!”

“I want one from Ju Yang-zhenjun, please save one for me!”

“No, no,” Xie Lian explained. “The ones I’m giving away are from the Crown Prince of Xianle, blessed by Puqi Shrine, guaranteed effective.”

Of course they were effective. Thousands of people prayed to the other heavenly officials every day until their ears buzzed with white noise. If they determined something was even slightly too much work, they’d hand it to the junior officials under them. As for Xie Lian, he only heard a few prayers at most, so who was more likely to actually listen?

The crowd scoffed. “What the hell, we’ve never heard of him before!”

“It’s okay if you’ve never heard of him,” Xie Lian assured them. “Puqi Shrine is located in Puqi Village, just three and a half kilometers out. Everyone’s welcome to pay a visit, and there’s no need to bring offerings…”

Before he even finished, the crowd broke up. Soon after, every single one of the spectators threw away the charms. Xie Lian trotted over to pick the charms back up, patting them clean before stuffing them back into his sleeves and not looking the least bit bothered. As he collected them, a pair of cloth shoes stopped before him. Xie Lian looked up and saw Lang Ying’s raven-black eyes peeking out from under his bandages, watching him intently.

“What’s wrong?” Xie Lian asked gently. “Go over there and sit with Guzi. Just wait for me for a bit.”

Lang Ying was quiet. Just then, the doors to a mansion at the end of the large street suddenly burst open, and a man was thrown out, followed by angry shouts.

“Quack doctor!”

The pedestrians on the streets immediately rushed over with thundering footsteps to watch the show. The protection charms that hadn’t yet been retrieved were instantly crushed, dirtied, and torn by the trampling. Xie Lian watched speechlessly and gave up on saving them. He made Lang Ying go back to watch over Guzi, then went to check things out himself. As he approached the entrance to the mansion, a man who appeared to be a wealthy merchant was arguing with an old man who appeared to be a doctor.

“What did you tell me when you came yesterday?!” the wealthy merchant raged. “Didn’t you say there was nothing to worry about? How do you explain what happened today? My wife neither fell nor ate anything foul, so how has it come to this?!”

The doctor, however, cried injustice. “When I came to diagnose your madam yesterday, she was perfectly fine! I think you need to find a Daoist, not a doctor!”

The wealthy merchant flew into a rage. He stood with one hand on his hip and the other pointing accusingly. “My son isn’t yet lost, so why do you curse him, you fake doctor?! Watch yourself—I just might sue you for all you’re worth!”

The doctor scooped up his medical case and clutched it close. “Even if you sue me, there’s nothing to be done. I really can’t make sense of that pulse! I’ve never seen anything like it in my life!”

The crowd jeered.

“Find yourself a new doctor!”

“Maybe you *should* go find a Daoist!”

Xie Lian instinctively felt there was something off about this affair, and he raised his hand above the sea of people.

“Please look here! There’s a Daoist here! I’m a Daoist!”

Everyone turned to look at him, puzzled. “Aren’t you a street performer?!”

Xie Lian explained politely, “That was only a side gig. Thank you.” He walked up to the merchant. “Will you bring me to see the esteemed madam?”

Shrill screaming could be heard from inside the mansion; the ladies-in-waiting were obviously panicking. The wealthy merchant had summoned a new doctor who hadn’t arrived just yet, and men facing a desperate plight will do anything—so he dragged Xie Lian inside to see his wife with no further questions, and Xie Lian grabbed the recently expelled doctor on the way in.

When the men entered the bedchamber, there was blood all over the floor, and a young woman lay upon the large, flower-curtained bed. Her face was white as a sheet; she was clearly racked by severe pain and acute agony, and would’ve surely been rolling about hugging her belly if the ladies-in-waiting had not been holding her down. The moment Xie Lian walked through the door, all the hairs on his neck raised.

This chamber was exceedingly heavy with yin energy, and that energy came from one place—that woman’s stomach!

Xie Lian immediately moved to shield everyone behind him and shouted, “Don’t move! There’s something not right in her belly!”

The wealthy merchant was terrified. “Is my wife about to give birth?!”

The doctor and the older ladies-in-waiting couldn’t stand such ignorance, and they snapped at him, “It’s only been five months, how could she be about to give birth?!”

The wealthy merchant raged at the doctor. “If she’s not about to give birth and you have no clue what else could be wrong, then you’re a quack! You can’t even read a pulse!”

The woman was going to faint, and Xie Lian shouted again, “Everyone, be quiet!”

Then he drew Fangxin. Seeing him suddenly unsheathe a long, black, murderous-looking weapon made everyone jump in surprise.

“What are you planning?!”

They saw Xie Lian release his hand, and the sword actually floated in midair! Now everyone was stunned.

Fangxin hung overhead, the tip of the blade facing down and pointing at the woman’s swollen belly. The killing aura of the sword was intense, and all of a sudden, the crowd saw the woman’s belly move. Within it, a lump of flesh raised up, jerking left, then right. It thrashed about until finally the woman hacked and coughed violently, and a stream of black smoke spewed from her mouth!

Fangxin was at the ready and immediately struck the black smoke. The woman let out a long wail of “My *son*!” and instantly passed out, then and there.

Xie Lian called back the sword and sheathed it anew on his back. He then turned to the doctor.

“It’s fine now.”

The doctor’s eyes were wide and his mouth agape. Xie Lian waved his hand in front of the doctor a couple times before he tentatively approached.

The wealthy merchant looked joyous.

"Is my son safe?"

But after the doctor felt the woman's pulse, his voice trembled with trepidation as he said, "It's gone…"

The wealthy merchant was dumbfounded, and after the shock passed, he roared, "Gone?! How did she miscarry just like that?!"

Xie Lian turned to face him. "The madam didn't miscarry; the baby is gone. Gone, do you understand?"

"What's the difference?" the wealthy merchant demanded.

"It's quite different," Xie Lian said. "Miscarriage is miscarriage. 'Gone' means this: there was a child in madam's belly at first, but that child has now disappeared."

The woman's abdomen had been swollen, but sure enough, although it bore no sign of external injury, it was now shriveled in an extremely unnatural-looking way.

The wealthy merchant was shocked.

"Wasn't…my son just in there?!"

"The thing inside wasn't your child," Xie Lian explained. "The madam's belly was swollen with that cloud of black smoke!"

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Once the doctor was certain the woman had only passed out and there were no life-threatening complications, they left the chamber.

"Daozhang, how should I address you?" the wealthy merchant asked. "Which temple do you hail from? Which zhenjun do you worship?"

"No need for the polite address, and the name is Xie," Xie Lian replied.

At first he wanted to say he was from Puqi Shrine, but when the words came to his lips, they somehow turned into "Thousand Lights Temple." When those three words left his mouth, his face felt oddly hot.

The wealthy merchant made a curious noise. “Never heard of it before. It must be quite far away?”

Xie Lian didn’t know how far it was either. He answered in a small voice, “Yeah…”

With the pleasantries seen to, the wealthy merchant rushed right to the point, his voice full of horror.

“Daozhang! What was that monster earlier? What my wife nurtured in her belly, was it always…that thing? That cloud of black smoke?!”

With the change of subject, Xie Lian also turned serious. “It might not always have been. Didn’t you say that when the doctor came yesterday, the madam was still perfectly fine? If her pulse was fine then but erratic today, then I’m afraid it was only last night that something happened to the baby. Please, think—last night, did the madam do anything? Or did anything strange happen?”

“Nothing happened at all last night,” the wealthy merchant said. “My wife never left the house! After she paid her respects at the Palace of Ju Yang and received this child, we built a small Ju Yang-zhenjun shrine at home so she could chant and burn incense without ever having to head out to a temple. She’s incredibly devout!”

“…” Xie Lian thought if Feng Xin knew someone worshipped him like this, it would be a real riot. After some thought, he asked, “Then did she have any strange dreams?”

The wealthy merchant blinked, then exclaimed, “Yes!”

Xie Lian perked up, and the wealthy merchant continued.

“Daozhang, you have such godly premonitions! My wife did indeed have a strange dream last night. She dreamt of a small child playing with her and calling her ‘Mom.’ Halfway through the dream, she felt something kicking in her belly, then she woke up. Afterward, she came to me happily, going on and on about how the child in her belly couldn’t wait to see Mom and Dad’s faces, so the child came to greet her first. I humored her at the time as well!”

In an instant, Xie Lian figured it out. He said firmly, “It’s *that* child that’s the problem!” After a pause, he asked, “Around how old was the dream child? What did they look like? Did the madam say anything to them?”

The wealthy merchant was in shock and drenched in cold sweat. “I’m afraid she didn’t remember. At the time, she told me she wasn’t sure how old the child was, only that they were fairly young and were begging for her to cradle them in her arms. When she held them, they were light.”

Xie Lian hummed, then said, “I’m going to ask a few more questions; please answer them honestly or I won’t be able to discern the truth. First, are there any conflicts between concubines fighting for favor in this household? Second, has the madam in question ever aborted a child?”

He asked about conflicts between concubines to determine if this was a curse born from mad jealousy; when women locked within the depths of a harem grew jealous, they were capable of anything. He asked about abortion because if a child was aborted for questionable reasons, then a grudge might linger in the mother’s body and cause a new baby to suffer.

Under Xie Lian’s questioning, the wealthy merchant truthfully confessed the whole story. Unbelievably, Xie Lian was spot on. Not only did the merchant have a number of concubines in his household who constantly bickered amongst themselves, he also had an outside lover impatiently waiting for him to take her in. Later, the madam’s servant girl also reported that her mistress had originally been only a concubine herself, and had been impregnated by the merchant once before. The madam listened to the flawed diagnosis of street homeopaths who declared her baby a girl, and since she wanted a boy, she aborted the child. After listening to all this, Xie Lian felt his head swim.

The wealthy merchant was anxious. “Daozhang, could this be the revenge of that unborn baby girl?”

“That’s a possibility,” Xie Lian said. “But not a certainty. After all, the madam couldn’t tell how old the child was in her dream, or whether it was a boy or a girl.”

“Then… Then Daozhang,” the wealthy merchant said fearfully, “if it was only last night that the cloud of black smoke filled my wife’s belly… where did my son go?”

“He was probably devoured,” Xie Lian answered.

The wealthy merchant shuddered. “D-devoured?!”

Xie Lian nodded.

“Then what should I do now, Daozhang?” The wealthy merchant was panicking. “I have another pregnant concubine—what if that monster comes again?!”

There was another pregnant woman in the household?!

Xie Lian raised his hand. “Calm down. Let me ask another question: Does the madam remember where she met the child in her dream?”

“She said she vaguely remembered it as a large mansion, but she definitely doesn’t recall much else. It was only a dream; who can remember a dream with clarity?” The wealthy merchant clenched his teeth. “I… After over forty years, I was finally expecting a son, but what misery! Daozhang! You’ll catch and kill that monster, right?! I can’t let it harm any more of my family!”

“Don’t panic, don’t panic,” Xie Lian comforted him. “I will do my best.”

The wealthy merchant was joyous, and he rubbed his hands together. “Excellent, most excellent, does Daozhang need anything? Compensation of any sort won’t be a problem!”

Xie Lian declined this offer, however. “I don’t need compensation, but I do have a few things for which I’d like to request your assistance. First, please find me a set of casual women’s clothing; it must be loose enough for a man to wear. Also, I’m afraid I’ll need a lock of hair from the expecting concubine to craft a spell.”

The wealthy merchant gestured to his servants. “Are you lot taking notes?”

“Second, please advise your expecting concubine to sleep in a different chamber,” Xie Lian continued. “No matter where or when, if she should hear the voice of a strange child calling her ‘Mom,’ she must not answer. She absolutely must not answer; it’s best if she doesn’t even open her mouth. People often don’t realize they’re dreaming, and their senses and self-awareness becomes dulled, but if you deeply ingrain this in her mind—

perhaps by repeatedly reminding her in her ear as she sleeps—maybe it will work.”

The wealthy merchant acknowledged the instructions.

Xie Lian then said, “And third—I have two little ones with me today. Please take care of them and give them something to eat.”

“For small things like that, never mind two requests, I would fulfill one hundred for you!” the wealthy merchant exclaimed.

Finally, it had come to the most important item. Xie Lian said, “Four.”

He took from his sleeves a protection charm blessed by Puqi Shrine and handed it over with both hands and great solemnity.

“Please take this protection charm and cry ‘Your Highness the Crown Prince, please protect me!’—that way, this case will be marked under my shrine’s title.”

“…”

That night, Xie Lian once again changed into women’s clothing.

Although he was no stranger to cross-dressing by now, it was his first time pretending to be a pregnant woman. It took him no more than half an incense time to get his makeup on, and once his face was painted, he stuffed a pillow up his skirts to give himself a belly, with the lock of hair from the expecting concubine hidden in said pillow. He was calm as he lay on the bed and slowed his breathing; it didn’t take long before he fell deeply asleep.

An unknown amount of time passed. Xie Lian slowly opened his eyes.

The sight before him was no longer the bedchamber of the wealthy merchant’s concubine—it was a resplendent pavilion.

Xie Lian’s first reaction was to feel for whether Fangxin was still next to him, and when he felt it was so, he relaxed. Fangxin was a sacred sword, after all, so it was bound tightly to his person. After that, he slowly sat up, but he found the bottom of his palms to be strangely sticky. When he raised his hands to look, he discovered he was lying on a bed covered in a terrifyingly large pool of blood. It had not yet dried, and it had painted him an alarming shade of red.

Xie Lian was used to strange sights, so he calmly got out of bed. He took a couple steps and suddenly felt something drop from him—looking down, it was the pillow, and he hastily picked it up and stuffed it back under his skirts. As he took another few steps, his “belly” dropped again, so he had to keep holding onto it with both hands as he surveyed his surroundings.

Having grown up in a royal palace, he had been unconsciously influenced by the things he saw and heard there, so when it came to beauty, Xie Lian had his own metric of judgment. While this little establishment looked exquisite, it was filled with a certain…feminine fragrance. If he had to guess, it was a restaurant or a place of pleasure. Regarding the architecture, the style was really quite old—very much like a building from centuries ago, although he couldn’t pinpoint when.

With such evidence on hand, this was unlikely to be a haunting born from the wealthy merchant’s aborted baby girl. When evil spirits created illusions, they could only draw on what they knew; the setting of a centuries-old establishment could only come from an evil spirit equally as old. Walking around the area, Xie Lian found no one, and he returned to the chamber where he had first lain down.

It was a woman’s bedchamber. Pulling out the drawers of the vanity, inside he found baby clothes and toys such as dolls and rattling drums. Xie Lian studied each object and found them to be brand new and stored with care—these items had been cherished. Meaning, to this “child,” this woman was full of love and affection.

Xie Lian rummaged further and was suddenly taken aback. Within those baby clothes was a protection charm, and that protection charm was his own!

Flabbergasted, Xie Lian had to verify it thrice. It wasn’t a mistake. It was absolutely his protection charm. And it wasn’t one of the simple charms he’d crafted recently—the ones for which he went into the mountains to pick herbs, sewed by hand, drew by hand, and tied with a red thread. This was the protection charm that almost everyone in the Kingdom of Xianle had owned eight hundred years ago, during the peak prominence of the Crown Prince of Xianle. The material and design was intricately exquisite, and it was stamped with the details of its provenance and whether it had been blessed.

Could the lady of this establishment have once been one of his believers?

In that dead silence, Xie Lian suddenly heard the sound of giggling.

It was clearly the laughter of a baby. It came abruptly and echoed everywhere in the room, which obscured its source. Xie Lian didn't move or react, but his mind churned: *That laughter sounds familiar. Where have I heard it before? Just where?*

Then it hit him. A memory of a child's voice surfaced.

"New bride, new bride, new bride in the red bridal sedan…

Brimming tears, past the hills, smile not under the bridal veil…"

It was the voice of that child spirit he'd heard at Mount Yujun when he was in the marriage sedan!

When Xie Lian snapped out of it, the laughter also came to an abrupt stop. He turned around swiftly but saw no trace of the singer.

After the affair on Mount Yujun, he'd asked after the child spirit in the spiritual communication array. But everyone told him there was neither child spirit nor anything of the sort to be found on the mountain, and only he had heard the voice. This was the second time this child spirit had appeared before him, so was it a coincidence? Or was it deliberate?

The child spirit stopped laughing and called out, "Mom…"

That call came from nearby, but Xie Lian couldn't figure out where. He stood there unspeaking, holding his breath, his ears intent.

After some silence, the child called out again. "Mom, hug me."

This time, Xie Lian figured it out—that voice came from his belly!

Xie Lian had been holding the fake belly with both hands, and only now did he realize with astonishment that the pillow in his hands had grown heavier. He smacked it soundly, and a lump of something tumbled out of his clothes. It seemed to be a ghastly pale child, and it spewed some substance from its mouth before scrambling away into the darkness and disappearing.

Xie Lian rushed over to inspect what it had left—the things it had spat out were some clumps of thread and a lock of black hair. It seemed Xie Lian's illusion spell had worked. That little ghost had wanted to devour Xie Lian's "child" the way it did that pregnant woman's, but instead, it consumed the cotton stuffed into Xie Lian's robes. Soon after, Xie Lian heard it cry sharply once more.

"Mom!"

No matter how it called, how pointedly it cried, Xie Lian never opened his mouth. He had determined that the child spirit was in fact the spirit of a fetus, and this chamber was the room where it or its mother had once lived. Evil spirits took the form and age of what they had been upon their death, yet it had mostly appeared as a cloud of black smoke or a blurry white shadow. This meant the spirit itself didn't know what it should look like, so it had no proper form. The baby clothes in those drawers clearly hadn't been worn, and that terrifyingly large pool of blood on the bed brought Xie Lian to conclude that the lady of this chamber had miscarried. Even so, her unborn child already had shape and retained a bit of consciousness. On becoming a fetus spirit, it wanted to return to its mother's belly, and so it had sought out the wealthy merchant's wife.

When it called to that woman in her dream, it had been the wrong move for her to open her mouth to acknowledge it. It must be said that the bond between mother and child is special, and therefore acknowledging the title was a form of "permission." When she opened her mouth, she gave the evil thing a chance to enter. The little ghost dove in, slid into her belly, and devoured the original fetus like a cuckoo in the nest. Xie Lian was a man, but he wasn't sure whether the child spirit would take the chance to sneak into his belly if he opened his mouth. Just in case, he thought it best to keep his lips shut.

Keeping them tightly sealed and gripping Fangxin in hand, Xie Lian searched for traces of the child. He had always possessed an exceedingly sharp instinct for danger, something that had been refined through thousands of battles. Even without a clear line of sight, as long as he had a hunch, he could thrust his sword and hit the mark nine times out of ten. Xie Lian's strikes were weakened in the child spirit's illusion, but after multiple hits, the spirit seemed less inclined to those bouts of laughter. After doing this for a while, Xie Lian felt a sudden pain spike in the bottom of his foot, and he paused briefly. It seemed he had stepped on something extremely sharp.

The child spirit saw him fall for its trap and cackled slyly. Though the voice was tender, it was a sound that couldn't have come from a small child but rather a malicious grown man. It made for a sharp, distinct contrast, and quite a creepy one indeed. However, Xie Lian's face never even twitched, and he didn't slow his pursuit. With a flick of his hand, he struck out with his sword again, and the blade pierced its target once more!

It had played with fire and was burned. The child spirit yelped in pain and hid far, far away. Only then did Xie Lian take a glance under his boot; it turned out he had stepped on a small, thin needle planted into the floor, pointing straight up. It had obviously been placed by the child spirit on purpose in the hopes that Xie Lian would cry out in pain. However, it miscalculated. Xie Lian was excellent at tolerating pain. Never mind stepping on a needle, if his leg were caught in a giant snare, he wouldn't utter a sound, if the situation called for him to bear it in silence.

That tiny little needle was buried deep in his foot, and Xie Lian wanted to pull it out at first. But since the child spirit scurried away after the setback, he was afraid it would take this chance to escape and continue to harm others, so he chased it out of the chamber with the needle embedded in his foot. After a while, he stopped feeling the pain and was able to run like the wind. There was no sight of the child spirit anywhere in the building, and Xie Lian was baffled.

Was it actually scared off by my attacks?

Just then, without a breeze in the night air, a nearby window opened by itself.

Xie Lian immediately rushed over but was shocked by what he saw. Outside the window, there was no sign of streets, no mountains, no pedestrians—only a deep, bottomless lake.

On the other side of this lake there was a house, and in that house there sat two small children: Lang Ying and Guzi, eating at a table. They didn't seem to notice the thick, black swirl of smoke directly above their heads, which cackled and cried out in a sharp voice.

"Mom! *Mom!*"

Xie Lian’s heart lurched. His hands gripped the windowsill, ready to warn them aloud, but then he remembered not to open his mouth and forced his voice back down.

Although this was nothing more than the child spirit’s illusion, he didn’t know whether Lang Ying and Guzi had truly been pulled in. If they had, then any harm they suffered here would affect their real bodies. He searched for a vase or something to hurl over as a warning, but he couldn’t find anything suitable. Tables and chairs wouldn’t fit through the window, and on top of that, the lake separated the two buildings. Did this mean he had to swim over?

Just then, Guzi yawned, looking listless. The cloud of black smoke suddenly gathered, ready to slip into his mouth.

Children’s bodies had terribly weak defenses when it came to such things; the spirit might be able to intrude even without permission.

Xie Lian had no time to think about swimming. In a split-second decision, he shouted.

“Close your mouth! Run!”

The moment he shouted, Lang Ying and Guzi jolted awake, closing their mouths in surprise as they leapt to their feet. The child spirit, however, had suddenly disappeared. In the next second, a cloud of black smoke exploded in Xie Lian’s face.

Even though Xie Lian closed his mouth the moment after he shouted, he could feel a stream of cold air snaking down his throat—it was the black smoke entering his stomach. His innards were numb, as if everything inside him had frozen in a matter of seconds. Xie Lian gritted his teeth and hastily tore apart a few protection charms. He dug out the herbs and charmed papers within and stuffed them into his mouth, chewing with force and swallowing. It didn’t take long before his throat itched, and that cloud of black smoke was retched back out!

Xie Lian covered his mouth with his sleeve, coughing nonstop and choked by tears. His mind raced to find another countermeasure. Even after the cloud of black smoke was forcibly vomited out, it still swirled about and relentlessly clung to his body. Xie Lian pushed himself onto the windowsill, raised himself up, and leapt into the lake outside.

With a splash, Xie Lian plunged deep into the heart of the lake. He held his breath, crossed his legs and arms, and assumed a meditative position, letting his body slowly sink to the bottom of that freezing lake. Once his heartbeat returned to normal, he looked up and could somewhat make out the black fog swirling above, blocking off the surface of the water. Once he emerged, he'd have to gasp in a deep breath, and in doing so, he would surely suck the child spirit into his stomach. A grown man with a fulsome baby bump wasn't the least bit funny to imagine.

However, his leap into the water had only been meant to give himself some time to think. It didn't take long for Xie Lian to come up with a counterattack.

So what if I swallow it? I'll just swallow Fangxin right after.

He'd learned that trick when performing on the streets. Although it might hurt, whatever—as long as the child spirit could be captured.

With his mind thus made up, Xie Lian released his arms and started swimming upward. But the muffled sound of sloshing water came from above, and suddenly a vast expanse of burning, vivid crimson red flooded his vision.

A tangle of winding, raven-black locks obscured his sight, though nothing could be seen through the splashing water and schools of air bubbles. Xie Lian blinked, trying desperately to bat away the thousands upon millions of lingering crystalline bubbles. Then he found himself caught by a pair of strong arms. One hand circled his waist, and the other grasped his chin.

In the next second, something cold and soft covered his lips.

Chapter 44:
Mind in Disarray, but Say Not That the Tender Heart Is Too

IN THAT INSTANT, Xie Lian's eyes bulged.

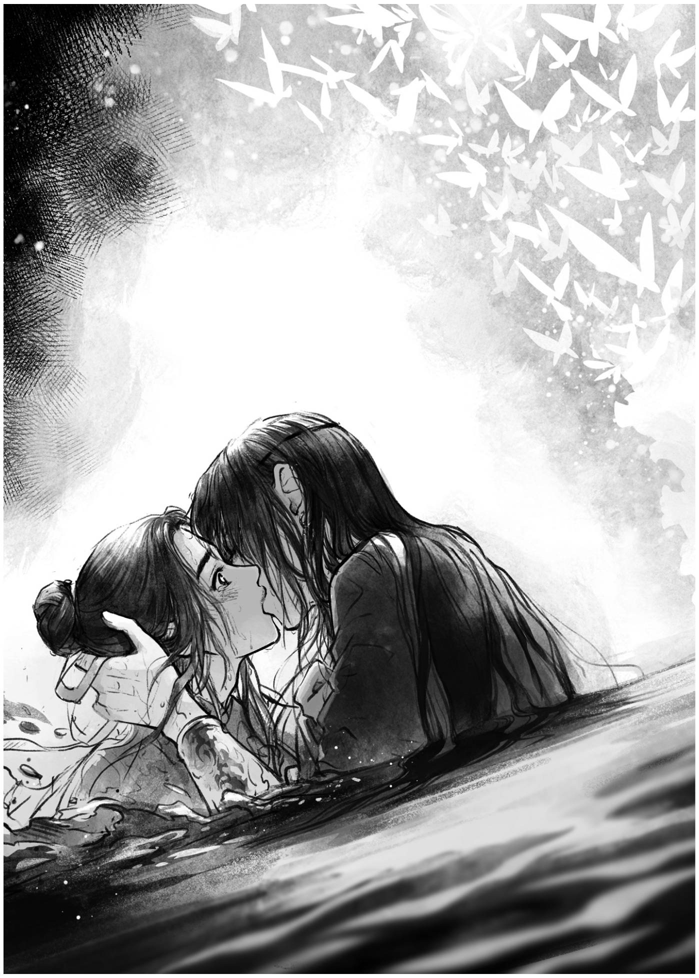
Never in his life had anyone treated him like this.

First, no one dared; second, no one could. However, this person was swift like the devil and had appeared so suddenly that he had no chance to defend himself before he'd been plunged into such a state. Flustered, he thrashed and desperately tried to push the person away. Instead, he only succeeded in choking on large mouthfuls of water as string after string of bubbles escaped from his mouth like crystal beads.

Of course, this was a big mistake underwater. The hand around his waist only tightened, pressing their bodies closer together, and Xie Lian's struggling hands were firmly folded and crushed against his own chest, trapping them in place. His lips, too, were securely sealed. The kiss deepened, and with it, a breath of cool, gentle air was transferred into his mouth.

Completely helpless and at a loss, just as Xie Lian began to accept his fate, he finally saw the person's face clearly. It was Hua Cheng.

The moment he realized it was Hua Cheng, he stopped struggling. Innumerable random thoughts popped into his mind, all inappropriate for the time and place, such as: *So it was Hua Cheng! No wonder he's cold. Ghosts don't need to breathe, but he can still transfer air to me?! Don't ghosts sink in the water?*



Hua Cheng suddenly opened his eye.

Staring into that dark eye from such an intimate distance, Xie Lian froze again, then resumed struggling, his arms flailing like a duck so clumsy it was drowning. Hua Cheng easily corralled those thrashing limbs, and with his arm still firmly locked around Xie Lian's waist, Hua Cheng took him and speedily swam upward. It didn't take long before they broke through the water's surface.

The waters were freezing and the air was likewise, yet Xie Lian's whole body burned. The moment they surfaced, Xie Lian wanted to turn his head away, but the cloud of black smoke was still swarming above and watching with predatory attention. When it saw someone emerge, it immediately locked on and flashed forward. Xie Lian only slightly turned his head away, but Hua Cheng's hand cradled his head and pressed him back into place. Their lips hadn't separated for a second before they were pressed tightly together once more.

Xie Lian's lips were aching and numb from the kiss, and he felt as if he was about to lose all sense of himself. If this were anyone else, he would've long since stabbed them with his sword—but it just had to be Hua Cheng! He was so completely at a loss as to how to respond that tears threatened to fall.

Just then, beyond Hua Cheng's face, he saw thousands upon millions of silver butterflies break through the water beside them.

With a sharp trill, that rain of butterflies shot from the surface like iron pellets, their blade-sharp wings reflecting a chilling glare. Within moments, the child spirit was slashed apart and screaming, and the black smoke dispersed as it tried to flee in all directions. However, the countless butterflies swarmed so thickly that they blotted out the sky, and they easily trapped it within their web of wings. No matter how the spirit rammed and pounded, it couldn't break through. Hua Cheng's eye never once lifted to regard the sight, and with Xie Lian in his embrace, he once again dove into the waters.

After a while, their lips finally parted.

Once separated, another stream of air bubbles spewed from Xie Lian's mouth, and Hua Cheng freed a hand to toss a die. The die spun rapidly in the water; it spun out a strong, whirling current before it finally stilled. Afterward, Hua Cheng and Xie Lian once again surfaced.

This time, the shore was not far away, and Hua Cheng finally swam over with Xie Lian in his grasp. Who knew what shore it was; there were lights and voices, seemingly close, yet also far away. Over the waters behind them, the swarm of butterflies shot into the sky with the cloud of black smoke their captive, flying toward the faint lights in the distance and leaving the fading trail of the child spirit's wails in their wake.

"Moooooom…!"

Xie Lian and Hua Cheng climbed ashore and collapsed heavily on the ground to stare at each other. Now Xie Lian was finally able to take a good look at him.

It had in fact only been a few days since they parted ways, but Xie Lian felt like it had been a long time since they were last in each other's company. Hua Cheng looked good in different ways each time they met. This time, he seemed older by a couple years. His face had always been handsome, and out of the water it was even more eye-catching. His locks were exceedingly black, his skin extremely pale, and on the right side of his cheek, a very thin braid with a red string was intricately woven through his hair. For the first time, Xie Lian realized that Hua Cheng's hairline was a subtle widow's peak; it made his face look even more shapely and fine. The black eyepatch covering his eye added a murderous aura that muted this elegance, but it balanced his good looks almost perfectly.

Hua Cheng's brow was knitted, as if he was enduring a most arduous ache. He gasped a few times before he opened his mouth to speak, his voice distinctly lower than before.

"Your Highness, I…"

From the hair on his head to the clothes on his body, Xie Lian's entire person was dripping with water. His lips were swollen, his eyes vacant. He was dazed for a good moment before he managed to stammer out, "I…I…I…"

The I's were uttered innumerable times until he randomly blurted, "I'm a little hungry."

Hua Cheng was taken aback.

Xie Lian hadn't yet recovered from the shock; his mind was a jumbled mess. "No. I…I…I'm a little sleepy…"

He flipped around and landed on his hands and knees, his back facing Hua Cheng. His hands fumbled across the ground like he was searching for something.

Behind him, Hua Cheng asked, "What are you looking for?"

Subconsciously, it was because Xie Lian didn't dare look at him. "I'm looking for a thing. I'm looking for my bamboo hat," he babbled incoherently. "Where's my bamboo hat?"

If anyone else were watching this scene play out, they would certainly yell, *"He's done for! He's lost his marbles!"* But in reality, it was only because Xie Lian had never experienced something like this, and the shock was too great… You see, he had simply lost control a little.

Xie Lian crawled around on his hands and knees as he continued to mumble to himself, shuffling away with his back still facing Hua Cheng. "I…I can't find it. I'm leaving now. I'm going home to eat…I need to go collect some scraps…"

"…I'm sorry," Hua Cheng said.

Sensing that the voice behind him was coming closer, Xie Lian jumped to his feet and cried, "I'm leaving now!"

That was practically a cry for help. Hua Cheng hastily said, "No!"

Xie Lian tried to run, but after only a few steps, his ankle twisted and he fell to the ground. He looked back to see a trail of blood behind him. The needle was now completely, deeply embedded in the bottom of his foot.

Hua Cheng seized his ankle, his voice alarmed. "What's wrong?"

Xie Lian immediately tried to pull his leg out of that grip. "Nothing, nothing, nothing, it doesn't hurt at all, it's fine!"

Hua Cheng was slightly angered by this. "How can it not hurt?!"

Then his hands moved—he was actually going to remove Xie Lian's boot!

Terrified, Xie Lian scrambled away again, exclaiming as he crawled, "No, no, no, no, there's no need!"

He kept crawling, kept trying to scamper off, but Hua Cheng held him tightly and stopped him from doing so. The chaos finally caught the attention of everyone else on shore, and in a racket as noisy as the beating of drums and gongs and other hellish clamor, a squawking crowd of who-knew-what kind of weirdos surrounded them.

"Who goes there?! Who dares?! Don't ya know what this place is? Are ya done with life or did ya wanna die again? I… Holy crap, ain't this Chengzhu?!"

The crowd of ghosts immediately hollered in unison, "GOOD DAY, YER OL' LORDSHIP!"

Xie Lian let out a wail in his head, wishing desperately that he could cover his face with his hands. This was Ghost City!

There were a number of ghosts in the crowd who he remembered seeing the last time he came by; Xie Lian even saw a familiar hog's head. He and Hua Cheng were surrounded by countless humans and ghosts alike, watching them. They were drenched from head to toe, and Hua Cheng still had Xie Lian's ankle grasped in his hand, not letting go. This was such a shocking scene that it finally snapped Xie Lian out of his tizzy.

Once the crowd of ghosts recognized Hua Cheng, they became even more excited, shouting their encouragement.

"Chengzhu! Are you trying to rape someone?! Do you need help?! We'll help you hold them down!"

"Beat it!" Hua Cheng furiously ordered.

The crowd of ghosts hastily beat it. However, even if they had only watched from afar and hadn't dared come close, Xie Lian still wanted to just pass out and end everything. This was because Hua Cheng had risen to his feet, bent down, and gently swept Xie Lian up into his arms to carry. They headed in the direction of Ghost City with a heavy gait.

Xie Lian was still dressed in women's clothing, and he could only be grateful that the pillow was no longer stuffed up his skirts; otherwise they would paint an even more frightening picture. But that frightful thought finally brought him completely back to the present. He squirmed a bit in Hua Cheng's arms without success, then cleared his throat softly.

"…San Lang, I'm sorry. I sort of lost my head just now. How embarrassing."

What had just happened had really been too shocking a blow for him to withstand. The word "blow" was harsh, but after all, that had been his first time… Yet it wasn't entirely because it was his first time. In the many centuries past, there had of course been a multitude of gorgeous female ghosts who tried to tempt him with their naked bodies, but Xie Lian's reaction had never been so embarrassing. So why, tonight, had he devolved into such a state? He supposed it had to be because the state preceptor had only ever taught him how to defend against the wiles of women, not men. Because of his lack of experience, he'd been swept off his feet.

Thinking back on his conduct, Xie Lian was slightly ashamed and felt that he might have overreacted. San Lang had meant well, so it was terribly rude of Xie Lian to respond in such a frightened manner.

But Hua Cheng replied, "Nothing of the sort. I was the one who crossed the line and offended gege. San Lang should be the one apologizing."

Seeing that he hadn't taken it to heart, Xie Lian secretly let out a breath of relief.

"I was in dire straits, and you were only trying to help; it wasn't really a big deal in the first place. Oh, that's right." Xie Lian suddenly remembered his mission. "San Lang, why have you suddenly appeared? Where's that child spirit?"

Hua Cheng, however, replied authoritatively, "Treating your wounds comes first."

During their exchange, they had arrived at a magnificent building. Xie Lian looked up to see, hanging upon the entrance, the establishment plaque of Paradise Manor.

He was astonished. Had Paradise Manor really been rebuilt so fast after it burned down? It looked exactly the same as the old version. But Xie Lian's was a guilty conscience, and he was too embarrassed to ask further. Hua Cheng carried him into the building in his arms and set him down upon a black jade divan. As Xie Lian sat there, Hua Cheng knelt before him, holding Xie Lian's injured foot and inspecting the tiny puncture on the sole, dyed by blood.

The position made Xie Lian uneasy. He cried, "Don't!" and made a move to get down, but Hua Cheng pushed him back and swiftly removed his boot and sock with a steady hand.

This leg also happened to be the one with the cursed shackle. The deep black chain locked around that clean white ankle made for a powerful contrast. Hua Cheng's eyes only lingered for a moment on that soft ankle before his palm pressed against Xie Lian's injured foot.

"This might hurt a bit," Hua Cheng murmured. "Don't hold it in, gege. Say something if it hurts."

"I…" Xie Lian trailed off.

Before he could finish, he felt Hua Cheng squeeze with a bit of force. Pain crawled up his leg, and he couldn't help but shrink back.

Hua Cheng's strength was extremely controlled, and little discomforts of this sort were normally nothing to Xie Lian. But for some reason, Xie Lian seemed unable to hide his pain in front of Hua Cheng. Maybe what Hua Cheng told him beforehand had made him try extra hard to endure the pain, and his efforts backfired.

Sensing Xie Lian shrink back, Hua Cheng held his ankle tighter and reassured him with a soft voice, "Don't worry. It'll be over soon. Don't be scared."

Xie Lian shook his head, but Hua Cheng's hands became even gentler. He operated speedily, and when he raised his hand again, the tiny needle had been extracted.

"All right, it's done."

Xie Lian focused on the tip of that needle. It shone with a vicious glint. Hua Cheng closed his fingers and crushed it easily into nothing but a small puff of black vapor that dissipated into the air.

Seeing this, Xie Lian put aside his discomfort and commented soberly, "What intense resentment. A typical fetus spirit wouldn't have powers that strong."

Hua Cheng stood. “You’re right. So this fetus spirit must not derive from a normal miscarriage.”

A masked man entered just then with his head down; he presented a clay pot with both hands and handed it to Hua Cheng. Xie Lian checked to see if that man’s wrist still carried a cursed shackle, but this time, the man’s sleeves were tied down fully and completely. Hua Cheng took the pot with one hand and glanced at it, then turned to pass it to Xie Lian where he sat on the black jade divan. Before Xie Lian even reached for it, the muffled cries of a child could be heard from within. It seemed something was madly knocking about inside the clay pot, making it shake and rattle from side to side. Xie Lian became even more cautious.

When he took the clay pot, he peeled up a small corner of the seal and peeked in. A dreadful chill rushed up his spine.

Inside the pot lay something that resembled a fetus. Although the arms and legs were grown, they were weak and powerless, and the head remained obscured in shadows. All in all, it was no more than a malformed lump of organs.

This was its true form!

Xie Lian immediately resealed the pot and said, “I see.”

He had once heard of individuals who searched for pregnant women who had not yet come to term. These people cruelly cut open the women’s wombs to transform the unborn children into little ghosts to cast spells on their behalf. The ghosts could be incited to do harm, ordered to protect the caster or a dwelling, or kept for general luck. This fetus spirit was no doubt the product of such sinister magic. Its mother was almost certainly one of Xie Lian’s worshippers, or his protection charm wouldn’t have been tucked inside the clothes of that unborn child.

Xie Lian hummed, then said, “This fetus spirit was captured by San Lang, but would you mind if I take it with me to investigate? I encountered it before at Mount Yujun, so this is the second time it’s appeared before me. I don’t know if it’s mere coincidence or if there’s a connection.”

“If you want to take it, then take it,” Hua Cheng said. “Even if I didn’t make an appearance, you would’ve captured it.”

Xie Lian chuckled. “Be that as it may, San Lang caught it effortlessly. Much more so than if I were to try.”

It was only an offhand comment, but Hua Cheng remarked, “Is that right? And if I hadn’t come, how did you plan to capture it? Take it into your stomach, then swallow your sword?”

“…”

He had actually hit the nail right on the head.

There was no trace of displeasure on Hua Cheng’s face, but Xie Lian somehow sensed that Hua Cheng might be a little peeved. Instinct told him that if he didn’t answer truthfully, Hua Cheng would become angrier.

Just as Xie Lian was thinking of a response, he suddenly felt his stomach shrink slightly, and without thinking, he said, “I’m a little hungry.”

“…”

It was only after the words had left his lips that Xie Lian realized he’d said anything at all. Embarrassed by the reaction on Hua Cheng’s face, Xie Lian explained himself honestly.

“This time it’s true…”

A moment later, Hua Cheng finally snorted and laughed out loud.

Once he laughed, it was as if all of Xie Lian’s clouded gloom dispersed, and he sighed in relief.

Hua Cheng, in comparison, was half laughing and half sighing as he nodded.

“All right.”

Hua Cheng wanted to host Xie Lian and set out a feast at Paradise Manor, but when Xie Lian heard “feast,” he knew it’d be far too much of an event. He suggested instead that they go out for a stroll and find something to eat at the same time. Hua Cheng agreed.

It was quite warm within Paradise Manor, and while they had entered dripping wet, they were both dry soon after. But it would be awfully conspicuous for Xie Lian to stroll around in women’s attire, so he borrowed a set of clean white robes from Hua Cheng. Afterward, they set out. Even after walking for quite a distance, the fetus spirit’s wailing was still audible, its cries of “Mom!” tearing through the air with dogged tenacity. However, Ghost City was resonant with a wicked racket of its own, so the din drowned out its cries.

The main street of Ghost City was as extraordinarily bustling as always, and on either side of the street, stalls sold specialty snacks. Although the ghosts running the stalls were the same as last time, their attitude toward Xie Lian was completely different. As Hua Cheng walked next to him, shoulder to shoulder, the bizarre-looking stall owners came out to greet them with smiles, bowing almost halfway over and fighting one another to offer welcome. It reminded Xie Lian of a certain idiom: the fox assuming the power of the tiger.[6]

Even as the citizens paid their respects to Hua Cheng, hundreds and thousands of eyes fixated on Xie Lian, their burning gazes full of judgment and conjecture. Just who was he, to be able to walk side by side with the Lord of Ghost City? This made Xie Lian wonder if maybe he had made another mistake.

Hua Cheng seemed quite at home here, standing before the eyes of millions as a sturdy rock in the flowing pandemonium of the current. He asked Xie Lian, “What do you want to eat?”

Xie Lian wanted to end things quickly. Finally seeing a stall that was selling something not too awfully weird, he said, “Let’s go with this one.”

However, Hua Cheng said, “Not this one.”

“Why?” Xie Lian was curious.

Hua Cheng didn’t say a word but gestured for him to look inside. Xie Lian took a look, and when the stall owner saw them stop, he rubbed his hands excitedly as if waiting to welcome them. He vigorously wiped down the tables, chairs, and benches, but the tool he used to clean the furniture was his tongue.

“…”

The bowls and cutlery dripped with shimmering beads of water after having been licked by that long, wide tongue, and they reflected a shine that made them look brand new. Xie Lian decided to abandon the stall and hurried away. After a few steps, he spied another stall—a shop selling chicken soup. It appeared neatly put-together, and the sign on the door said: *“Home-raised chicken, slow-cooked broth. Made fresh, guaranteed clean!”*

Xie Lian stopped. “Oh, chicken soup. How about a bowl?”

Hua Cheng, however, said again, “Not this one either.”

Xie Lian got it. “Is the problem with the dishware or the chicken?”

Hua Cheng brought him into the shop, peeled aside a set of curtains, and gestured for Xie Lian to look. Curious, Xie Lian poked his head in and was immediately rendered speechless. An enormous pot sat inside the kitchen with a roaring fire beneath it, steam rolling forth. Inside the pot was a large man with a bright red cockscomb on his head, and he was happily taking a simmering bath in the boiling water. Next to the pot were many buckets; they contained salt, pepper, herbs, and other such seasonings.

From the storefront, a customer yelled, “Boss, add more salt to the soup! It’s too plain!”

As the man bathed, he grabbed a large handful of seasoning and smeared it on himself, rubbing it hard into his body with a towel to increase the flavor. Then he let out a long, warbling *“Cock-a-doodle-doo!”*

Xie Lian dropped the curtain and silently walked out.

After making a great round of the stalls, they finally found a shop. Its branded specialty was *“Authentic delicacies of the Mortal Realm,”* though Xie Lian remained doubtful of just how “authentic” the cuisine could be. For example, as far as he knew, mortal chefs wouldn’t use the flesh of large, hard-to-hunt yao beasts to make barbecue skewers. Nonetheless, this shop was the most normal compared to its brethren.

The moment Xie Lian and Hua Cheng sat down, the mob of ghosts who had been following them immediately crowded around, eagerly soliciting the opportunity to offer more dishes to their meal.

That hog butcher carried a pale and nicely meaty human leg, and he slapped it soundly as he cried with his rough voice.

“Chengzhu! Do you want fresh thighs?! This just came in!”

The crowd yelled at him.

“Get outta here! D’ya think Chengzhu’s friend would eat that shit? Ya takin’ him for the Green Ghost? Maybe yer own thighs would be more edible!”

“It fuckin’ reeks of blood! You’re disgustin’!”

That hog actually raised one of his pig legs and shouted, “If it suits the palate of Chengzhu and Chengzhu’s friend, my ol’ leg is nothing, I’ll butcher it! Lemme tell you, meat of my ol’ flesh is definitely bursting with flavor!”

Xie Lian grinned in spite of himself and ate his congee with his head down. Hua Cheng pointedly ignored them, so the crowd of ghosts instead fervently tried to push their goods onto Xie Lian.

"Local street food specialty: brain juice! Specially picked yao brains, aged with over fifty years of cultivation! Smell this delicious fragrance, my good sir!"

"This duck blood pudding is really good, *quack*! Take a look, *quack*! It's freshly cut from me own flesh, *quack*! Won't you give it a try, *quack*?!"

"Authentic fresh graveyard fruit; if it ain't growin' on dead bodies, we won't pick it. It's true, not a word of falsehood…"

Mountains and mountains of food were offered, so much that Xie Lian had trouble seeing it all, and he thanked them endlessly. He didn't want to snub this wave of ardent affection, but at the same time, so many of those exotic street foods were truly difficult to accept. In the midst of the chaos, he saw Hua Cheng sitting there, his hand propping up his cheek, watching him with a broad grin.

Xie Lian looked around, cleared his throat, and pleaded in a small voice, "San Lang…"

Only then did Hua Cheng speak. "There's no need to mind them, gege. They're overly excited because there's a guest."

"Chengzhu, don't say that!" a ghost immediately pleaded. "It ain't like we get excited over just anyone! If Chengzhu is our granddaddy, then Chengzhu's gege is our great-uncle…"[7]

"Yeah! Of course we gotta get excited when great-uncle comes around!"

Xie Lian didn't know whether to laugh or cry. What the heck were they even saying?

"Stop that nonsense!" Hua Cheng barked. "Shut up!"

The crowd of ghosts hurriedly acquiesced. "Yes, sir! Chengzhu is absolutely correct. We're shutting up. He's not our great-uncle!"

A few female ghosts who had been giggling on the side clearly couldn't hold it in any more, and unexpectedly they called out to Xie Lian.

"Hey! You… Weren't you that Daoist gege who told Lan Chang you couldn't get it up?"

"…"

Xie Lian almost spat out his mouthful of congee on the spot.

It was as if that crowd had uncovered a major secret, and they exploded.

“Holy shit! You’re right!”

“It’s him, it’s him, it’s him! Lan Chang was going around telling everyone!”

The smarter ghosts hastily smothered the mouths of those who were chattering, but Hua Cheng had no doubt heard. Xie Lian peeked up and saw Hua Cheng cock an eyebrow and watch him with an unreadable eye, as if trying to make sense of what “get it up” had to do with Xie Lian. That was the original excuse Xie Lian had used when that female ghost clung to him; even though the crowd had mocked him at the time, he faced it like it was nothing. Yet now that the claim had been thrust in front of Hua Cheng, Xie Lian suddenly couldn’t endure it. He was so embarrassed that he desperately wished he could choke himself to death with his congee.

“I…” Xie Lian began.

Hua Cheng seemed to be waiting patiently for him to continue, but how could something like this possibly be explained? Was he really going to argue with a straight face that he was not, in fact, impotent?

Xie Lian finished pathetically, “I’m full.”

That wasn’t a lie, he really was full, so he stood up immediately and hurried out of the stall. The ghosts howled ceaselessly after him as they carried their mountains of delicacies and exotic dishes.

“Goodness, My Lord! Yer not gonna eat any more?!”

Hua Cheng ran after him too, but spared a moment to look back. He once again commanded them, “Beat it!”

Yet again, the crowd of ghosts hastily beat it. Xie Lian had taken off in a random direction, but seeing that the ghosts hadn’t followed him, he slowed his pace to wait for Hua Cheng. It wasn’t long before Hua Cheng came strolling up with his hands clasped behind him.

“I didn’t know…gege suffers from such an unspeakable affliction?” he asked, deadpan.

Xie Lian immediately cried, “I don’t!” Then he lamented woefully, “San Lang…”

Hua Cheng nodded. “Very well. San Lang understands. I won’t speak another word on the subject.”

He put on the face of an extremely good and obedient individual, but he was very obviously faking it.

“You’re so insincere,” Xie Lian said.

Hua Cheng laughed. “I promise, you will not find another person more sincere than me in this world.”

At that familiar response, Xie Lian laughed too.

A moment later, he asked in all seriousness, “San Lang, do you know where Thousand Lights Temple is?”

Chapter 45:
To Compose in Nuit Blanche, Fragrance Added by Red Sleeves[8]

THIS WAS A QUESTION to which Xie Lian already vaguely knew the answer, but Hua Cheng's reaction was not what he expected.

After a brief silence, Hua Cheng blurted out, "I'm sorry."

Xie Lian was puzzled. "What?"

His first assumption was that, if "Thousand Lights Temple" wasn't some kind of a joke, the individual most directly tied to the incident could only be Hua Cheng. But no matter how off the mark he might have been with this guess, there was no reason for Hua Cheng to apologize.

Hua Cheng didn't respond, just gestured Xie Lian to keep walking with him, so Xie Lian followed his lead. They walked for a while, and after making a turn, the sight before him opened to a broad horizon.

Before Xie Lian's eyes rose a temple that glowed with quiet transcendence. In an instant, his breath hitched.

All around them, the colors of the Ghost Realm crisscrossed, smoky grays and vivid scarlets. Surrounded by such a backdrop stood that temple—majestic and splendid, its thousands of lights resplendent, as though this were paradise itself.

A temple founded on such radiance and brilliance was out of place sitting within the rowdy, chaotic pandemonium of Ghost City, but it inspired awe all the same. The second that one laid eyes upon it, it left a deep, enduring impression.

It took a long time before Xie Lian found his voice. "This is…"

The pair stood before the temple, gazing at the structure with admiration.

Hua Cheng raised his head slightly and explained.

"It was the Mid-Autumn Festival a few days ago, and I figured gege would probably join that rabble in their frivolous games. So I set this place up to provide gege with some amusement while attending the banquet—to make things interesting and relieve your boredom.”

“…”

Hua Cheng’s approach to “relieving boredom” was much too sensational. For the sake of Xie Lian’s “amusement,” he had built a temple and raised three thousand Blessings Lanterns of Everlasting Light!

Hua Cheng lowered his head, fixing his cuffs as he continued, “I didn’t want you to know, because I arranged all this without permission. Pray gege isn’t offended that I built gege’s temple in such an unruly place.”

Xie Lian immediately shook his head. It seemed Hua Cheng hadn’t wanted to tell Xie Lian of it because he thought he was causing Xie Lian trouble. He really didn’t know what to say—at this point, giving thanks again would fall flat. Thus Xie Lian steadied himself, drew in a deep breath, and proceeded to admire this Thousand Lights Temple with renewed care.

A brief moment later, he tilted his head and asked, “This temple is a singularly beautiful work of architecture, and massive as well. The artistry and craftsmanship of its edifice is divine. It couldn’t have been constructed in mere days. San Lang, you didn’t build this only recently, did you?”

Hua Cheng smiled. “Of course not. Gege has a good eye—this was built a long time ago. I never found a use for it, so I had it hidden away; no one has ever been allowed inside. I’ll have to thank gege for finally giving it purpose and allowing it to see the light of day.”

Xie Lian was surprisingly relieved to hear this.

If it had been built a long time ago for some other reason but never properly settled into a use, then it had only been adopted for convenience’s sake. If Hua Cheng really had constructed a temple just for Xie Lian, he would feel even more uneasy. Of course, with Hua Cheng’s personality, it could very well have been built solely to amuse himself. Although Xie Lian was quite curious as to why Hua Cheng would construct a building that so vastly differed from the rest of Ghost City, he contained the impulse to ask. It wasn’t a good habit to pry, lest one accidentally ask what one shouldn’t.

“Want to go in and take a look?” Hua Cheng asked.

“Of course,” Xie Lian answered cheerfully.

Side by side, they entered the temple, leisurely strolling down the jade-stone path. The interior of the temple was spacious and bright, but it didn't have a divine statue, nor any cushions for worshippers to kneel upon.

"This was built in a hurry, so there are many careless and thoughtless elements," Hua Cheng explained. "Pray gege forgives me."

Xie Lian grinned. "Not at all. I think this is very nice. Very, very nice. It's good that there isn't an idol or cushions, and best if there won't ever be. But how come there's no establishment plaque?"

He wasn't calling Hua Cheng on a fault, it was just that even the jade stones paving the temple paths were meticulously engraved with "Thousand Lights Temple," but the establishment plaque above the entrance was missing. Naturally it couldn't have been a simple oversight, hence Xie Lian's curiosity.

Hua Cheng chuckled. "It can't be helped. There isn't really anyone around here who can write. Just think of that crowd earlier; it'd be impressive if they could even recognize letters. Does gege like any particular calligraphy masters? I'll invite them over to help compose the plaque. Although, in my opinion, the best solution would be for gege himself to draw up a sign and hang it over Thousand Lights Temple. That would be more than splendid."

As he spoke, he pointed to the altar in the great hall. This jade altar table was exceedingly long and wide, and various offerings and an incense burner were neatly placed upon it. There were even brushes, inkstones, and paper, providing an air of scholastic elegance.

The pair approached the table, and Xie Lian asked, "Why doesn't San Lang compose one for me?"

Hua Cheng's eye slightly widened at the suggestion, like the thought was unexpected. "Me?"

"Yeah," Xie Lian replied.

Hua Cheng pointed at himself. "You really want me to write?"

Xie Lian noticed his discomfort and asked, "Will it trouble San Lang?"

Hua Cheng cocked an eyebrow and replied, "No, it's just…"

Seeing that Xie Lian was waiting for him to answer, he clasped his hands behind his back and continued, somewhat helplessly, “All right. It’s just…I don’t write well.”

Now this was something new. Xie Lian truly couldn’t imagine there was anything Hua Cheng couldn’t do well. He smiled.

“Oh? Really? Will you write something and show me?”

“Are you sure?” Hua Cheng asked once more.

Xie Lian took out a few sheets of blank paper, laid them neatly upon the jade altar table, and attentively flattened them. He then picked a fine-looking zihao brush made of brown rabbit fur and placed it in Hua Cheng’s hand. “Come.”

As Xie Lian had prepared everything, Hua Cheng relented.

“Fine. But don’t laugh.”

Xie Lian nodded. “Of course.”

Thus, Hua Cheng took the brush and started writing, assuming a serious air. Xie Lian stood next to him and watched, but the more he watched, the more unreadable his face grew.

Xie Lian genuinely wanted to hold it in, but he failed. As Hua Cheng wreaked mad havoc on that paper, he chided Xie Lian half in warning and half in jest, “Gege.”

Xie Lian immediately schooled his expression. “My bad.”

He didn’t want to laugh, but what could he do? Hua Cheng’s writing was just too funny!

Of all the crazed brushwork Xie Lian had ever witnessed, none could measure even halfway to Hua Cheng’s wild script, a wildness that carried a wicked whirlwind of malevolence. If any calligraphy teachers saw it, their eyes would roll back and they’d perish on the spot. After a long time, and with immense difficulty, Xie Lian managed to make out “sea,” “water,” “peak,” “clouds,” and other such words through the scrawl. He guessed Hua Cheng must be writing:

“After seeing the vast sea, no water can compare;

Scattered from the peak of Mount Wu, there are no other clouds…”[9]

Hua Cheng was master of the Ghost Realm and feared by all of heaven and hell; to think he was finally showing such a vulnerable side of himself because of something like writing! The thought alone was going to make Xie Lian's gut burst from holding in his laughter. Hua Cheng completed the piece with a wave of his hand, and Xie Lian forcibly feigned calm as he picked up the end product using both of his own.

"Good. It's got such personality, an essence all its own. It's got *style*."

Hua Cheng put down the brush, looking like he had the posture wholly perfected, and smiled with his eye in a crescent. "Madness, you mean."

Xie Lian pretended not to hear and began to offer commentary with a straight face. "In fact, writing well is not difficult; what's difficult is writing with a unique style. If one's calligraphy only looks good in the same way that thousands of other works look good, then it's nothing more than common. San Lang has a good foundation, the flair of a master, a daring spirit that conquers the world…"

There were two other idioms that followed: "broken land, armies in turmoil." It couldn't be helped; fabricating praise was hard work. Hua Cheng stood there, and the more he listened, the higher his brows raised.

"Really?" he asked doubtfully.

"When have I ever lied to San Lang?" Xie Lian asked.

Hua Cheng calmly and languidly added a few incense blocks to the small golden vessel on the side, and in the midst of that fresh faint fragrance, he continued with an air of nonchalance.

"I do want to write well, but there's no one to teach me, and I don't know if there are any tricks to the art."

He had certainly asked the right person. Xie Lian hummed and replied, "There's really no trick to it, just…"

Xie Lian considered it, but in the end he felt he couldn't explain everything he wanted to with words alone. So he shuffled closer to pick up the brush himself and wrote the last two verses of the poem Hua Cheng had started. It was done in one breath, and after staring at it for a moment, he sighed a rueful chuckle.

“How shameful. I haven’t had much chance to write in many years, so I’m not as good anymore.”

Hua Cheng stared at the four verses that looked as vastly different as heaven and hell, the style of the characters foreign to each other, especially the last two verses that Xie Lian had added to finish the poem:

“Many times I’ve passed through the flowers, yet I spare them no glance;

For half my fate is in cultivation, and the other half, in you.”

He connected the verses together and read them a few times, his eye twinkling and unmoving from the page. It was a while before he looked up.

“Teach me?”

“Well, I dare not lecture,” Xie Lian said.

Thus, he began to give Hua Cheng a detailed introduction to calligraphy without holding back, providing insights and all that he’d learned from practice in his younger years. They were surrounded by subtly perfumed air and brilliant lights. Within the great hall, their chatter was low, light, and leisurely; Xie Lian lectured earnestly, and Hua Cheng listened intently. It painted a soft picture.

After a while, Xie Lian prompted him, “Why don’t you try again?”

Hua Cheng agreed obediently and took the brush from his hand to write another few characters, his expression serious. Xie Lian crossed his arms as he watched, tilting his head.

“Interesting. But…”

He still felt there was something off about the way Hua Cheng put his brush to paper. He observed with a frown and suddenly realized where exactly it was going wrong—Hua Cheng wasn’t holding the brush correctly to begin with!

If even the way he held the brush was all over the place, of course it would come out strange!

Xie Lian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, and stood closer, reaching out to correct him without thinking. “You’re holding it wrong, it’s like this…”

Only after he reached out did he suddenly realize his actions might be inappropriate. He wasn't an elderly teacher tutoring a young disciple, so to instruct Hua Cheng by guiding his hand might be overly familiar. However, since the hand was already out, there was no reason to pull back rashly; he'd only appear overly self-conscious. So, after some hesitation, Xie Lian didn't remove his hand. He remembered the Gambler's Den; hadn't Hua Cheng taught him how to roll dice like this, hand on hand? Although Xie Lian felt he had learned absolutely nothing then, and even had a sneaking suspicion he'd been somehow deceived, here and now he was sincere in his desire to teach Hua Cheng.

Thus, Xie Lian's warm palm relaxed as it pressed close against Hua Cheng's cold hand. With a gentle hold, he led Hua Cheng's hand to guide the brush across the paper, whispering, "Like this…"

He sensed Hua Cheng's brush growing wilder under his hand, so he pressed down a little more firmly to control and correct its path. It didn't take long before it veered further off course, resisting the control, so Xie Lian had to grasp tighter. The characters drawn through their power combined were crooked and twisted, unseemly and ugly, and the more Xie Lian guided, the more he felt something was off. Finally, he couldn't help but gape at the results.

"What…"

The ink on the paper had run tyrannically askew. As if this were a successful silly prank, Hua Cheng snickered softly, leaving Xie Lian exasperated.

"San Lang…don't be like this. Learn properly. Write properly."

"Okay," Hua Cheng obediently acquiesced.

It was blatantly obvious that he was only pretending to be serious. Xie Lian shook his head, feeling ridiculous.

Hua Cheng's hand might have been cold, but for some reason, it felt like a lump of hot coal in his grasp. Xie Lian didn't dare hold him any tighter. His eyes wandered to the edge of the altar, and he stopped.

At the corner of the jade altar table sat a tiny, lonesome flower.

Chapter 46:
Bizarre Trick to Open Doors, Ghost Fetus Stolen

A FAR-GONE MEMORY surfaced in Xie Lian's mind, and he was momentarily stunned. It was like a dust-covered picture, but when he tried to wipe it clean, it remained blurry. Unspeaking, he frowned and loosened his grasp to pick up that flower.

Hua Cheng put down his brush as well and slowly began to grind some ink. "What's wrong?"

"…" Xie Lian smiled. "Nothing. Just…this flower's scent is refreshing. I've always liked this sort."

Offerings of flowers in temples and palaces were far from rare. However, most devotees offered large, fresh bouquets of bright red or purple blossoms, or handcrafted imitation flowers that never wilted.

After a pause, Xie Lian said, "Could this be the flower which Crimson Rain sought?"

Hua Cheng smiled. "Gege has such godly premonitions."

As they laughed, the pair finally completed a set of compositions together; the subject was still those four lines of verse. Hua Cheng picked it up to admire, looking most pleased.

"Mmm, excellent. Frame it."

Hearing him say "excellent," Xie Lian made a confused noise. When he heard "frame it," he made the same confused noise again.

"You're not thinking of hanging it on the wall, are you?"

If Xie Lian's deceased teachers ever discovered his involvement in such a set of compositions, they'd probably rise from the dead out of sheer rage.

However, Hua Cheng only laughed.

"No. I'm keeping it for myself. I'm not showing this to anyone."

Just then, they heard faint screaming from outside.

“Fire!”

“Fire!”

“Paradise Manor is on *fire*!”

The interior of the main hall of Thousand Lights Temple was exceedingly quiet, and since they both possessed better-than-average senses, the moment they heard, they instantly looked at each other.

“Paradise Manor again?” Xie Lian blurted out, the words leaving his lips before he realized it was silly to say “again.” Unruffled and unhurried, Hua Cheng stowed away the compositions.

“No need to worry. Gege, just sit here and relax. I’ll be back shortly.”

As if Xie Lian could sit back and relax!

“I’ll come with you!” he said as he hastily followed, feeling rueful as he thought, *How come Paradise Manor gets set on fire every time I visit?*

That “God of Misfortune” title of his was about to be proven true once again. Although this time the fire had nothing to do with Xie Lian, being sorry for things was by now a habit of his. They hurried back to Paradise Manor, and on the way, the main street was laden with smoke and jammed with little ghosts and monsters frantically running back and forth with buckets of water. When they saw Hua Cheng and Xie Lian approach, they all called out.

“Chengzhu! Don’tcha worry yer ol’ lordship, the fire ain’t big, it’s already out!”

Hua Cheng gave no reaction, but Xie Lian let out a breath of relief.

“Thank goodness! Thank you, everyone, for your hard work,” Xie Lian gently praised them.

The little ghosts hadn’t expected any kind of gratitude at all—not to mention that the “thanks for your hard work” came from Chengzhu’s friend! They became quite excited indeed.

“Not hard! It’s nothin’ major!”

“It’s our duty!”

Only then did Xie Lian realize that his show of gratitude was rather inappropriate, as he wasn’t the master of this establishment. However, since

Hua Cheng didn’t say anything, it probably wasn’t too horrible that Xie Lian took initiative to do so. He briefly reprimanded himself mentally, then stopped worrying about it.

Xie Lian and Hua Cheng entered Paradise Manor to inspect the spot where the fire had started. Sure enough, it was only a small area, confined to a corner of an insignificant house in the larger complex. No wonder the flames had been extinguished so quickly.

However, once this was confirmed, Xie Lian became alarmed. He turned to Hua Cheng.

“The arsonist wasn’t playing some harebrained prank, and this didn’t come from a random desire to torch something. It looks more like a ploy to divert everyone’s attention.”

But if that was the case, what was the purpose of the distraction? Xie Lian came to a startling realization.

“The fetus spirit!”

When they left Paradise Manor, the wails and cries of the fetus spirit were audible from even far away; the sound of its weeping was sharp, and its yowls for “Mom” clear. But now that voice was gone!

The pair rushed to a side chamber outside the main hall of Paradise Manor to check. When they first left, Hua Cheng had casually placed the clay pot containing the fetus spirit on a table. The pot still sat there, but when Xie Lian picked it up, he immediately sensed the difference in weight. It was too light. When he opened it, sure enough, there was nothing inside.

Something locked within the clay pot could not possibly have broken the seal over the opening. Xie Lian immediately determined, “Someone let the fetus spirit loose.”

Hua Cheng, however, didn’t look the least bit fussed. “It was indeed stolen. The butterflies badly wounded the thing; it couldn’t get far on its own.”

“Then that’s easily taken care of,” Xie Lian said. “San Lang, does your Paradise Manor have guards patrolling the premises? Ask if they saw anyone suspicious.”

“No guards,” said Hua Cheng.

"…" Xie Lian blinked. "None?"

"Mm-hmm. There've never been any," Hua Cheng replied.

No wonder Xie Lian had seen no guards when he snuck around Paradise Manor last time. He'd thought he didn't see them because they were well hidden, but he hadn't realized there weren't any at all.

Slightly stunned, he asked, "You're that lax regarding Paradise Manor?"

"Gege, have you ever paid attention to the doors?" Hua Cheng asked.

Xie Lian thought about it. "No, I haven't. Could it be there's something extraordinary about them?"

"Correct." Hua Cheng pointed at the set of doors to the side chamber. "If one is not the master of this establishment, and one were to steal even a single item that didn't belong to them, they would be trapped inside the room and unable to open its doors."

Xie Lian remembered that the last time he'd come to Paradise Manor, he had always opened doors with dice, and when he finally left, it had been through the whirlwind created by the Wind Master—raising the roof and thus avoiding any doors. Those were all images of violence, and the more Xie Lian recalled, the more he thought he should stop thinking, feeling slightly ashamed.

After a brief pause, he asked, "Then say that San Lang were to steal a spiritual weapon from me and keep it within Paradise Manor. Since I was the original owner of the weapon, could I not take it away?"

Hua Cheng arched his brows. "Of course not. Once it's in my hands, it's mine. But don't wrong me so, gege. I would never steal any of your spiritual weapons."

Xie Lian cleared his throat. "Of course. I knew that. That's why I said 'if.' Besides…I don't really have any spiritual weapons worth stealing anyway…"

Hua Cheng's jokes ended there. He smiled, then continued, "So it's impossible to steal something from me without my notice, which is why there is, of course, no need for guards."

Xie Lian’s first instinct was that whoever had stolen the fetus spirit hadn’t left through the doors and had employed a different method. But looking around, the side chamber’s roof was undamaged, the floors looked pristine, and the walls were in fine shape too; there was no trace of a break-in. He couldn’t help but come up with a more skin-crawling thought.

What if the one who stole the fetus spirit hasn’t left and is still within this side chamber?

Although there was nowhere in the side chamber to hide, there were plenty of ways to turn invisible. Maybe the thief was near them at this very moment, quietly watching their every move. Xie Lian peered around, watchful for any abnormal movement in the air. However, his eyes and instincts both told him that neither a third person nor a ghost were present. Perhaps he would have to pursue a different line of thought.

Just then, Hua Cheng chuckled.

“There’s no need for gege to be concerned. I have my way of finding our fetus spirit thief.”

Hua Cheng truly looked like he had a plan. Xie Lian turned to him, and after a brief moment to consider the matter, he was suddenly enlightened as well.

They waited in silence, and their wait was short. The sounds of commotion closed in, and soon a large group of nefarious creatures swarmed outside the side chamber like a flock of squawking birds.

“Chengzhu! What does your ol’ lordship desire, calling us over?”

This crowd was close to a thousand at minimum; had it not been for the large courtyard and architecture of Paradise Manor, they might not have fit. The one who had brought them was the masked man, and he reported the situation to Hua Cheng.

“Chengzhu, everyone who appeared on the streets today should be here. Ghost City is locked down; no one can leave.”

It was the voice of that young man from last time. Xie Lian couldn’t help but steal a glance at him.

The ghosts cried, “Chengzhu! Was the one who set the fire caught?”

“They’re sayin’ somethin’ was stolen?! They tired of livin’ or wanna die again or what?!”

“So insolent! Settin’ fires and stealin’ shit—they’d dare mess with Chengzhu’s authority?! There’s no way Chengzhu will let ’em go!”

“…”

Although the crowd of ghosts wasn’t talking about Xie Lian, as one who had set this same building on fire, kidnapped someone, and subsequently been let go by Hua Cheng, Xie Lian felt like he’d been shot by countless arrows. He softly cleared his throat, feeling increasingly guilty. He stole a glance at Hua Cheng, but coincidentally met his eye as Hua Cheng also glanced over with an unreadable look. Xie Lian immediately averted his gaze.

He heard Hua Cheng say flatly, “The one who stole the fetus spirit can come forward now; don’t waste my time.”

The crowd was shaken.

“Among us?”

“I thought it was an outsider…”

“Who the hell is it?! Just come forward already!”

Some time passed; the uproar died down, but still no one stepped forward.

“Very good. As brave as expected,” Hua Cheng said dryly. “Men on the left, women on the right; divide into rows.”

Although the ghosts were puzzled, they didn’t dare disobey Hua Cheng’s command and immediately did as they were told, swiftly forming two large groups. The male ghosts squished on the left, their voices gruff and crude; the female ghosts were on the right, every one seductively alluring. Hua Cheng and Xie Lian shared a look, then went directly to the right side to inspect the line of female ghosts, their eyes sweeping past ten women at a time. As he traveled down the line, Xie Lian saw a particular female ghost and paused in his tracks. She wore a long dress and had caked her face with so many layers of terrifyingly pale white powder that her real features were practically indiscernible. But that heavily painted face was still somewhat familiar.

"Miss Lan Chang?" Xie Lian addressed her.

The female ghost was taken aback, as if she were the one who had just seen a ghost. Sure enough, it was Lan Chang—the lady ghost who had clung to him on the streets of Ghost City, fought with the hog butcher, cackled at his declaration that he "can't get erect," and consequently spread the rumor.

After shaking off her shock, Lan Chang put her hands on her hips and raised her chin. "What? Yer the one who said ya can't get it up! I didn't wrong ya! Ya gonna seek revenge an' tell on me to Chengzhu?"

Although the other female ghosts were all a little nervous, they still giggled softly at her comments. Hua Cheng walked over, and though his expression was unreadable, Lan Chang clearly still feared him somewhat. Her imperious attitude visibly deflated as he approached.

"The miss can talk however she wants about a joke like that, it's fine," Xie Lian gently assured her. "However, that fetus spirit has harmed many; it reeks of blood. It shouldn't be left on the loose, so please return it."

Even through the heavy powder on Lan Chang's face, it was clear that she had gone even paler. She backed away in a hurry, but since she was in a crowd of other ghosts, she didn't get very far before she was caught by a number of hands that thwarted any chance of escape.

"I dunno what yer sayin'!" she cried in desperation. "What fetus spirit?!"

"Please return it," Xie Lian coaxed.

"Return what?! I don't have it! You accusin' me of stealin' from Chengzhu, but everyone knows there's no way anythin' can be taken from Chengzhu's house. Whatever we take, we can't carry it out!"

The mob of ghosts agreed—yeah, that was right, they all knew. Even the hog butcher grumbled as much.

"Paradise Manor only just caught fire. I haven't left the street all night," Lan Chang added. "If I stole anything, I wouldn't have time to hide it!"

As she spoke, she opened her arms, showing off her empty hands, and even lifted her dress to prove she wasn't hiding anything.

But Xie Lian pointed out a key piece of evidence. “Miss, the last time I saw you, it was freezing cold, yet you still dressed so very lightly. It’s a beautiful day today, and you’re wearing a long dress. Are you considering a change of style, or are you hiding something?”

The ghosts hadn’t noticed this until he brought it up. Lan Chang usually dressed in an extremely revealing fashion—when Xie Lian said “very lightly,” he was being polite. While flouncing about the streets, Lan Chang usually left her chest almost fully exposed. However, today she wore a long dress that thoroughly covered her legs and waist. Exceedingly strange indeed!

Besides, when Hua Cheng showed Xie Lian around Ghost City’s streets earlier, they had been surrounded by that hollering crowd of ghosts who wanted to stuff them with delicacies. Yet they had seen neither hide nor hair of Lan Chang, who normally loved to strut about and cuss at everyone on the streets while passionately proclaiming to all in sight, “It’s not me—he’s the one who can’t get it up!” The crowd immediately grew restless.

“You didn’t take what didn’t belong to you; you only took what was once part of you,” Xie Lian explained slowly. “Right now, the fetus spirit is in your belly!”

If the fetus spirit thief had no other way to leave and wasn’t lurking in the side chamber, that left only one explanation: the thief openly left through the front doors.

Had the fetus spirit been carried to term, it would be a child, an independent person. However, the fetus spirit was forcibly removed from its mother’s womb before it reached that point. Therefore, if its mother stuffed it back into her belly, then naturally it would qualify as something that belonged to her. Rather, it could be said that the fetus spirit was no different from a piece of her own flesh, a part of her body. After all, the blood bond between a mother and child was thick; under the circumstances, they were but one body, so the mother could of course leave Paradise Manor openly and unharmed.

Therefore, the one who stole the fetus spirit had to be a female ghost—and the mother of that child. Locking down Ghost City and calling forth all the female ghosts who had been on the streets before and after the fire would therefore surely lead them to the culprit. Hua Cheng must have realized all this the moment they entered the side chamber; Xie Lian was quite sure of it.

Suddenly, Lan Chang let out a great shout and seized her own belly in a mad fit.

“Miss?” Xie Lian exclaimed.

Lan Chang’s face was ghastly pale, and she couldn’t utter a single word. All of a sudden, it was as if something in her belly exploded—her previously flat stomach swelled into an enormous ball, almost ripping her long dress apart as rolls of black smoke seeped out through the seams.

The other female ghosts released their hold on her and slunk back while Lan Chang kept a death grip on her belly. She yelled in panic, “Stop this tantrum!”

The fetus spirit in her womb was kicking up a storm.

“Gege, stand back,” Hua Cheng calmly said.

“It’s fine!” Xie Lian exclaimed.

Lan Chang fell heavily on her knees, her face twisted with agony. “Listen to me! Be good! Won’t you just be good?! Stop this tantrum!”

“Miss Lan Chang, let it out first!” Xie Lian urged her.

Lan Chang shook her head wildly. “*No!* No, no, *no*! I will keep him in my womb and raise him well for sure. He won’t go out and harm anyone anymore! Chengzhu, please, I beg you, don’t take my son away. I’ve searched for him for centuries! Don’t take my son! Don’t hand him to those scoundrels in the heavens!”

As Xie Lian suspected, it seemed the ghosts in Ghost City were perfectly aware that he was from the Heavenly Realm. Lan Chang let out a shrill scream and rolled on the ground, hugging her belly as if it were no longer part of her body and was instead its own live creature—shrinking at times, swelling at others, and twisting up, down, left, right. The black smoke grew thicker; the fetus spirit must have regained some strength after recovering in its mother’s womb and was ready to start trouble again. The crowd of female ghosts rallied again to hold Lan Chang down, yet they were powerless to do so. At the sight of this predicament, the male ghosts on the left yelled, “WE GOT THIS!” and rushed forward to restrain her. It was complete chaos.

Xie Lian clenched his fists. “Miss Lan Chang! The fetus in your belly is much more powerful than you!” he yelled. “You clearly can’t bear to hurt it, but it can hurt you! You can’t do anything! It will suck you dry sooner or later and break free; let it out now!”

If Lan Chang refused to release the thing in her belly, soon she was would be sucked dry and shredded to pieces by that savage spirit. This, of course, would leave Xie Lian no choice but to personally cut it out himself. Although it might be better than watching her be ripped apart by her own son, he really didn’t want to do so unless there truly was no alternative. While he would prefer not to cut her open, he certainly couldn’t let Hua Cheng do it for him. But Lan Chang was stubborn as a mule, and even as she wailed in agony, she refused to relinquish the fetus spirit. This couldn’t go on for much longer, so Xie Lian decided to take action.

Xie Lian set his jaw in determination. “Excuse my imposition!”

However, when his hand reached for Fangxin’s hilt, Hua Cheng immediately held him back. “No need,” he said darkly.

A flash of golden light suddenly erupted from the center of Lan Chang’s belly, its rays blinding the ghostly crowd. They yelped loudly, fleeing to make room.

“What the shit?!”

Xie Lian focused his eyes. When that golden light died down, the fetus spirit that had been so desperate to burst out seemed now to be somehow fettered, and Lan Chang’s belly had flattened to its normal state. The thing holding it back was a belt on her waist.

At first glance, that belt looked quite ordinary, but when Xie Lian took a good look, he was astonished.

“…Why would you have something like this on you?”

Even with its color faded from washing, Xie Lian could tell that the belt was an item of heavenly essence.

Many ingenious spiritual weapons of the heavens only revealed their phenomenal abilities when protecting their masters in dire circumstances.

Even though the embroidered patterns on the belt were heavily worn and damaged, Xie Lian was certain that it was an item only heavenly officials could possess: a Golden Belt.

And by the look of its design, the belt had once belonged to a heavenly official of the Upper Court!

Golden Belts were considered a sophisticated gift in the Heavenly Realm, and the act of gifting one carried a special meaning. If a male official were to gift his belt to another, it was a gesture to signify affection, and the nature of that "affection" was evident. One could well imagine that something like a Golden Belt would not be so easily given away, and also not so easily lost.

Xie Lian gaped. "Miss, could your child be…"

He trailed off as he suddenly remembered where he was. Regardless of whether this was the lair of all evil, to inquire after the details of a woman's personal affairs in public was far from courteous. He immediately cut off.

"No!" Lan Chang instantly cried in response.

I haven't even said anything. What are you saying "no" to? Xie Lian wondered. He asked instead, "Did you depend on this Golden Belt to sustain yourself throughout the past seven or eight hundred years?"

The crowd of female ghosts were stunned to hear this.

"Holy shit…Lan Chang, yer that old?!"

"Didn'tcha always say yer only three hundred sumthin'?"

"No, she even said she was two hundred once! Yer falsifyin' yer records!"

The fetus spirit had about seven or eight hundred years of cultivation, so its mother would of course be around the same age. However, Lan Chang didn't possess a grudge of equal weight; the Golden Belt's immense spiritual powers had doubtless been instrumental in enabling her stay in the corporeal world as an ordinary ghost for so long. If the father of that fetus spirit was a heavenly official, then the degree of its savagery made sense.

A heavenly official having an affair with a mortal woman… Whether he'd ended up abandoning or neglecting her, she had met a violent end with her baby forcibly torn from her womb. Now both mother and son were of the Ghost Realm, and the fetus had likely murdered countless others. No matter what, this case was no less serious than the case of Xuan Ji. It even seemed rather similar on the surface, which made it easy to determine how best to handle it.

Xie Lian looked to Hua Cheng. “San Lang, this miss…”

No need to say more. Hua Cheng said, “Do what you must. You needn’t ask me.”

“Mmm,” Xie Lian answered softly.

Upon receiving permission, he turned to Lan Chang. All the ghosts were demanding more gossip.

“Lan Chang, Lan Chang, who’s yer baby’s dad?!”

“What an outrage! Did he only care enough to kill it but not bury it? Cared to knock ya up but not raise the kid?!”

“Just who is it? Ya gotta avenge yerself!”

Lan Chang clenched her teeth and stared hard at Xie Lian. “Who else could it be?”

She didn’t utter the name, but Xie Lian understood.

“Why don’t you come back to the Heavenly Court with me?”

“No!” Lan Chang immediately shouted.

Of course, it was useless for her to object. Willing or not, Xie Lian had to take her away, and he hardened his expression.

“This fetus spirit is exceedingly violent; who knows how much blood is on its hands? The case has become too convoluted for you to continue to shield it. This matter must be confronted and reported to the Heavenly Court,” Xie Lian stated solemnly. “If that heavenly official is an honest one, or if there was some kind of misunderstanding between you, then we can have you and your child recognized and deal with the matter of its crimes after. If that heavenly official has wronged you or worse, then there’s even more reason to demand justice. No matter what, the fetus spirit is your son, but also *his* son. How can anyone else interfere if the father is ignorant of this affair?”

The ghosts thought his speech made sense. Also, if they let Lan Chang haul her son up to cause a riot in the heavens, how exciting would that be? The bigger the chaos, the better! So they urged her:

"Yeah, Lan Chang, what are you afraid of?! Go settle yer score with that guy!"

"If he won't recognize you, we'll burn down his temples!"

Xie Lian said to Hua Cheng, "I will make a trip to the Upper Court this instant and report this case."

While Lan Chang protested, she knew she couldn't stop him. After snapping out of her shock, she suddenly knelt down and prostrated before Hua Cheng. "Chengzhu, thank you for your kindness and grace in sheltering me!"

Xie Lian was taken aback.

"It was out of desperation that Lan Chang set fire to Paradise Manor and broke the rules of Ghost City!" she continued. "I am ever so sorry! Pray Chengzhu will not hold it against me."

She had always been a sauntering shrew, but when she spoke now, it was like she was a different person. Many of those familiar with her watched in shock. But Hua Cheng appeared unstirred, and he turned to Xie Lian.

"Gege stopped by in too much of a hurry. I'll wait for you to come down again and host you properly next time."

Xie Lian nodded, then took Lan Chang and rushed straight to the heavens.

As he walked down the main streets of the Heavenly Capital, he announced in the spiritual communication array, "Everyone! Everyone, please make your way to the Palace of Divine Might. There is a matter that requires conference."

He exited the array as soon as he was done and didn't waste any time bringing Lan Chang to the Palace of Divine Might. Lan Chang was but an ordinary ghost and couldn't enter the golden palace, so Xie Lian waited outside with her until Jun Wu himself arrived and granted permission for Lan Chang to enter.

It didn’t take long for the heavenly officials who were currently present in the Heavenly Capital to make their way to the hall, where they were met with the bewildering sight of a crude female ghost slathered in heavy makeup. She stood in stark contrast to the transcendence of the Heavenly Court. A black-clad heavenly official strolled in, and he paused for a moment when he saw what was in the center of the hall. This was Mu Qing. Lan Chang also glanced at him and immediately lowered her head, her lips quivering.

Mu Qing showed no further reaction and only asked impassively, “Your Highness, who is that woman?”

At this address, Lan Chang’s face changed. She looked at Xie Lian as if she were recalling something that she wasn’t entirely sure of.

Just then, both the Wind and Water Masters arrived; the pair of brothers looked quite similar to each other with their matching fans and white robes gently fluttering. They painted a beautiful picture.

Shi Qingxuan fanned himself as he spoke. “Yeah, Temple Master, why did you bring a lady ghost here today?”

Xie Lian was puzzled. “‘Temple Master’? What Temple Master? Of Puqi Shrine? Why the sudden address?”

Then he realized Shi Qingxuan probably meant “Master of Thousand Lights Temple!”

He didn’t know how to acknowledge the title and could only pretend he hadn’t heard it. But Shi Qingxuan was cheerful as he greeted everyone around him, then turned to the ghost.

“Huh? The ghost jiejie has something in her belly? Why do I have the feeling that it’s…” he wondered aloud as he approached, looking like he wanted to touch her.

Shi Wudu snapped his fan shut. “Qingxuan!”

Shi Qingxuan’s hand instantly shrank back, and he tried to justify himself. “I just thought there was an aura of evil and wanted to see if there was something dangerous…”

Shi Wudu continued to scold him, “You’re a man and a heavenly official. This is the Palace of Divine Might! How could you do something so unmannerly? No, don’t turn into a woman either! Even in a woman’s form it’s equally disgraceful; change back right this instant!”

Ling Wen shook his head. He folded a stack of documents and reports under his arm and approached to place his hand on Lan Chang’s belly. After a moment, he dropped his hand and hummed.

“What a vicious fetus spirit. How many hundreds of years old?”

“Seven or eight hundred,” Xie Lian answered.

He gave an account of the two times he had met the fetus spirit, and how the fetus spirit’s attack on a pregnant woman led him to find the female ghost Lan Chang. He didn’t bring up the details of Hua Cheng and Ghost City, and Lan Chang herself naturally remained quiet on the subject.

At the end, Xie Lian concluded, “And that’s how it came to be. I don’t know if that heavenly official is still in this world or still working with us, nor whether there is some misunderstanding in all this, nor whether he knew. That’s why I brought this miss here.”

Feng Xin knitted his brows. “If there wasn’t a misunderstanding, and he knew about the mother and child, then it’s simply irresponsible of him to leave them like that without a word.”

Pei Ming crossed his arms and commented leisurely, “I completely agree with General Nan Yang. This is far too irresponsible. Dunno which heavenly colleague this discarded baggage belongs to, but if he’s on duty, he best come forward.”

As he finished, he felt countless eyes on him. Silence had descended upon the Palace of Divine Might.

A moment later, Pei Ming wondered aloud, “Are you all having some sort of misunderstanding about me?”

“…” Shi Qingxuan stopped fanning his fan. “I don’t think it’s a misunderstanding, more like we know you too well.”

Pei Ming immediately defended himself. “It wasn’t me!”

Everyone laughed dryly, and even Shi Wudu and Ling Wen looked unconvinced by his denial. Pei Ming grew frustrated, and he supported his temple with his hand as he explained earnestly.

"Well…I've had some flings with women of the Ghost Realm before, but I really don't recognize this one."

If those words of his were to be taken seriously, they were believable. How could the man himself not know with whom he shared a past? Many criticized Pei Ming's promiscuity, but he had never denied any affairs and never denounced anything he'd done; it wasn't like he couldn't afford it. Unless they behaved like Xuan Ji, women who had affairs with him were lavished with wealth and sweetness. They were all guaranteed a lifetime of riches and care until they no longer wanted to associate with him. If Lan Chang truly had a fleeting affair with Pei Ming while she was alive, she shouldn't have suffered having her womb ripped open and her son stolen from her, or his becoming a vicious ghost.

Besides, Pei Ming had high standards when it came to women. He only dallied with those of extraordinary appearance, and he also preferred beauties with a natural look. As everyone in the hall could see, Lan Chang wore such a heavy layer of makeup that her real features were indiscernible, and her general looks, class, and behavior were a far cry from the lovers Pei Ming usually chose. So when he claimed he wasn't to blame, everyone silently somewhat believed him—except it was only "silently" and "somewhat." When an occasion to see General Pei get checkmated presented itself, how could they not indulge in the fun? And so, they stood by and watched him argue with smiles on their faces; whether any member of the crowd was convinced depended entirely on their current mood.

At first, Xie Lian also thought the father was more than likely Pei Ming; he had a track record, after all. But as he studied Pei Ming's expression, Xie Lian grew less certain. Pei Ming didn't seem to be lying. He recalled Hua Cheng saying that there was nothing to fear, as Pei Ming wasn't a shady fellow—or something along those lines.

After some contemplation, Xie Lian continued, "Miss Lan Chang originally responded ambiguously, asking 'Who else could it be?' So, I also assumed… But since General Pei denies such claims, maybe there's been some misunderstanding. Besides, it can't be the same person every time, so why don't we ask around…?"

Unexpectedly, Lan Chang spoke up. "It's not him."

Xie Lian was taken aback and turned to her.

"It's not him," Lan Chang repeated.

Ling Wen said coolly, "What, so it's not?"

Shi Wudu also politely said, "So it actually isn't."

"…" Pei Ming turned to Shi Wudu and Ling Wen. "I already said it wasn't. The two of you are adding insult to injury. Just you wait."

The heavenly officials were briefly disappointed, but then they grew even more excited. After all, Pei Ming was always the one generating wanton scandals; if it were him, this would be nothing new. But if he wasn't to blame, that meant there was likely another male official, present or not, who had instigated a new wave of excitement. How could they not be thrilled?

Earlier in Ghost City, Lan Chang had hinted that the man in question was Pei Ming, but now she denied it. Xie Lian felt something was amiss, but he made no effort to express his suspicion.

"Hmm. Then who is it?" he inquired.

Lan Chang stared squarely at him, her eyes unmoving.

"You."

Xie Lian thought she wasn't finished. "What about me?"

"I said, the man is *you*!" Lan Chang declared.

Chapter 47:
Impetuous Matches, None Admits Amidst Conflicted Laughter

IF LAN CHANG HAD DECLARED something like "the one who killed me was you," it still wouldn't have been as much of a bolt out of the blue.

Xie Lian was practically knocked out by her thunderbolt. "Me?!"

Upon the throne, even Jun Wu's hand seemed to have slipped from its usual spot supporting his temple. The heavenly officials were shocked into silence, and they immediately turned their heads toward the Emperor. However, Jun Wu's hand had quickly righted itself, and he'd already resumed his usual somber pose with his head on his hand. The officials turned their heads back to Xie Lian.

Was this it? The third banishment to manifest before the eyes of all?!

Xie Lian felt his soul shaking, and he forced himself to swallow the habitual "I can't get erect" alibi, which almost escaped through his teeth.

That was only ever an offhand comment used to easily excuse himself, not appropriate for deployment in circumstances such as these. Besides, there was already private gossip circulating the Upper Court about various martial gods and their attitudes toward women. When Feng Xin saw women, he respectfully stayed far away, and Lang Qianqiu blushed the moment he saw them. Mu Qing refused to even acknowledge ugly women, and while Pei Xiu was expressionless when he saw women, who knew what was actually going through his head. Quan Yizhen didn't ever seem to have women on his mind, but Pei Ming's was constantly consumed by them. If Xie Lian tried his usual excuse now, no doubt his name would be added to this list.

"Miss Lan Chang, please calm yourself," Xie Lian pleaded earnestly. "There is definitely no such possibility."

Lan Chang was glaring so hard her eyes were larger than bells. "Yes, there is. It's you, the Crown Prince of Xianle!"

"…"

Even though this woman had died after Xie Lian's first ascension and the timing could perhaps match up, wouldn't the man himself know better than anyone whether he'd met her before?

Amidst the circulating whispers, Xie Lian's expression and tone grew solemn. "Miss, I may not be a saint, but I still know a faithful heart. If I did not love someone, I would never cross any such lines with them," he said sternly. "If I did, I would never allow that person to suffer any speck of grief, even if I had to beg and collect scraps, or busk and perform on the streets to support my family. You are in the Palace of Divine Might; do not speak falsehoods."

Shi Qingxuan piped up as well, "If it really was His Highness who committed such a deed, why would he bring this ghost jiejie to the heavens to confront everyone? And why has Miss Lan Chang only now recognized him? Just think about it; it makes no sense."

It was easy to see as much, but with such a spectacle to be had, who cared? The crowd maintained a reserved attitude, and an official even blindly hypothesized, "Perhaps His Highness lost his memory, so he doesn't remember the things he's done."

"Honestly, it's more believable that he's bold enough to think she wouldn't recognize him after eight hundred years."

Xie Lian was speechless and cautioned the crowd. "My Lords, to prove something is impossible by fabricating something even more inconceivable is a dangerous path to walk."

Feng Xin looked like he wanted to say something, but also like he couldn't make up his mind. In the end, he remained silent.

Jun Wu cleared his throat. "Xianle, how many Golden Belts did you once have in your possession?"

Xie Lian put his hand to his forehead. "Too many. At least ten…"

Mu Qing answered flatly, "Over forty, each with different embroidery and patterns."

He only realized the comment was inappropriate after the words left his lips, and he quickly shut up. Instantly, some of those present remembered that Mu Qing had been Xie Lian's personal attendant and taken care of his daily needs, which was how he knew such details. Many of the officials couldn't help but think, counting Golden Belts alone, over forty! This Highness the Crown Prince really had once lived an extraordinarily luxurious life. Even Xie Lian himself felt rather embarrassed when thinking on it. Back then, he'd changed into a different extravagant ensemble every day, and his belts had changed every time to match whatever outfit he wore—unlike now, where in an entire year he only wore three sets of clothing over and over again. Those three sets all looked exactly the same too; at a cursory glance, people likely thought him so poor that he only had one set of clothing at all.

Jun Wu asked Xie Lian, "And where are they now, do you remember?"

Xie Lian and Feng Xin were both stumped.

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead. "*Ahem*, not really. We're discussing things from eight hundred years ago, after all. I've long forgotten where they disappeared to."

It wasn't because they had been tossed out. At the time, he and Feng Xin often pawned things off whenever their funds grew tight. Too many things had been sold off, and he really couldn't remember whether any belts had been left at the end.

Feng Xin didn't have the heart to discuss this subject in detail but said nonetheless, "The Golden Belt might not have been a gift. Perhaps it was picked up somewhere."

Jun Wu didn't seem to actually expect Xie Lian to remember either. "Xianle. I remember that your cultivation method demands a body of purity, lest your spiritual power be significantly damaged."

"Yes," Xie Lian confirmed.

"Wow, so I was right!" Shi Qingxuan piped up again. "Just looking at His Highness, I could tell he must've cultivated that kind of path. If that's the case, never mind knocking anyone up, I bet he's never even held anyone's hand."

Xie Lian was about to say "That's right," but his mind suddenly presented him with the memory of a pale, slender hand as cool as jade. It made a striking contrast against that bright red wedding veil and a thin, red thread knotted about its third finger. The affirmation stuck in his throat, no longer able to roll out. Everyone in the hall stared at him intently. With one simple look, it was obvious his silence meant Shi Qingxuan's declaration was untrue!

But never holding anyone's hand was too low of a standard—even if hands had been held, it wasn't such a big deal.

Shi Qingxuan immediately added, "Even if he's held hands, he must've never kissed anyone before."

Again Xie Lian wanted to say "That's right"—but this time, endless streams of crystalline air bubbles suddenly floated before his eyes. As the translucent beads dispersed through the water, he saw an exceptionally handsome face, eyes closed, a shapely forehead lined by a widow's peak, beautiful to behold.

This time, not only was he unable to squeeze out a single word, his entire face flushed bright red.

"…"

"…"

"…"

Every heavenly official in the hall understood in an instant, and dry coughs sounded all around. Shi Qingxuan was starting to regret saying anything. He knocked his fan over his own head once and secretly passed a message to Xie Lian through their private communication array.

"Sorry about that, Your Highness. I only wanted to convince everyone that you're really the ascetic sort, but I hadn't realized you weren't. So you've indulged in such experiences; I really couldn't tell!"

That last statement shattered Xie Lian's will. He choked out with difficulty, "Don't say any more. That was…an accident…"

Jun Wu pressed a fist against his lips, clearing his throat loudly. "Very good. You have not violated your vows in these intervening years, correct?"

Xie Lian finally let out a breath of relief. "That's right."

“Then this will be easy,” Jun Wu stated. “I have a sword here, Yanzhen.[10] It possesses a particular ability: should the blood of a virgin flow upon it, it shall not be stained but become brighter as it is washed. Take a drop of your blood and let it fall upon the blade, and we shall see the truth.”

Although it had been common knowledge for years that Jun Wu had a hobby of collecting rare and strange swords, the heavenly officials still thought to themselves, *Why does My Lord have all these messed-up swords? What’s even the use in collecting them…?*

Xie Lian himself was feeling more and more nonplussed by the situation and only wanted to end it as soon as possible. Ling Wen brought forth that sensual Yanzhen sword and immediately slid the blade across Xie Lian’s hand. Countless eyes watched intently, and Shi Qingxuan clapped.

“Good. Case closed!”

Drops of blood slid past the blade, leaving not a trace behind, as expected. The proof was as solid as the mountains, and the crowd could only drop the subject.

“Ah, I see.”

“Then who could it be?”

Their tone was lackluster, dripping with disappointment.

Ling Wen turned to Lan Chang politely. “Miss, please tell us honestly the identity of the heavenly official in question. The fetus spirit in your womb is restless and your powers aren’t strong enough to contain it. Only its blood-bound father can calm and discipline it. I…”

Before he could finish, Lan Chang unexpectedly pointed at Ling Wen and cried, “You! That man is you!”

Ling Wen was speechless. “…?”

Ling Wen had probably come directly from his temple to attend this sudden meeting and was currently in the form of a man. He was baffled to suddenly be named the child’s father. The heavenly officials sputtered and Pei Ming chortled.

“Noble Jie, did you even finish tending to your reports before you went and found a nice girl to knock up? Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha…”

This was probably what they called instant karma. Ling Wen shook his head and gracefully declined Shi Wudu’s compassionate gesture of giving his “good nephew” a congratulatory red money pocket.

Ling Wen’s expression calmed. “I haven’t finished, and neither do I have the time.”

After such a riotous back-and-forth, and after Lan Chang hurled accusations at a number of officials, naturally no one believed her anymore.

Feng Xin couldn’t watch any longer and concluded grumpily, “I get it. This ghost woman was completely crazy from the start and is only here to throw blame. She’s come to cause trouble on purpose.”

Lan Chang cackled, sounding more and more like a crazy hag as she continued. And if she did continue, who knew who she’d accuse next? The heavenly officials changed their tune.

“Yeah, who knows, maybe that Golden Belt was stolen…”

“To be fair, I also have more than one Golden Belt. I actually can’t be sure how many I have exactly, and I don’t remember if I’ve stored them properly.”

Lan Chang wouldn’t let anyone off so easily, however. Putting her hands on her hips, she screamed at the crowd, “What, tryin’ ta get away?! Too late! Not a chance! Is it you, is it you, or is it you?!”

At this point, it was obvious she was pointing fingers randomly—even Ming Yi, who was silently standing in a corner focusing on chewing whatever his cheeks were stuffed with, was indicted as the father at one point. It was chaos in the great hall, and everyone was shirking responsibility left and right.

“Take her away, take her away!”

“Don’t let her spout any more nonsense!”

“Jiejie, you’re not my type—don’t you slander me!”

“This is downright outrageous!”

Jun Wu waved his hand, and a junior official came to collect Lan Chang. Even as she was dragged out of the Palace of Divine Might, she continued to scream and laugh shrilly. The officials within the hall returned to their assigned positions, their hearts still pounding as their heads throbbed. At first everyone had thought the matter didn’t involve them and they only came for a good show. Now they weren’t so sure whether they would be the ones getting a bucket of crap dumped over their heads. They might even wind up landing themselves a new play in the Mortal Realm, starring alongside a ghostly lady love with gaudy makeup and a ghostly son who had murdered thousands. Sensing the danger, they all slapped their hands in exasperated helplessness.

“There’s no way to investigate this case!”

“I think she’s simply wrong in the head. No need to investigate, it’d be a waste of time. Just lock her up.”

“This could very well be the Ghost Realm mucking about on purpose.”

Xie Lian disagreed, however. “On the way here, Miss Lan Chang was quite self-aware, so why did she suddenly grow erratic the moment she entered the Palace of Divine Might? I’m afraid it isn’t something that can be brushed off by calling her ‘wrong in the head.’”

Thus, the crowd broke down and divided into two sides to debate and argue; in the end, the conclusion was still that never-changing “We’ll see, we’ll see.” After the meeting was dismissed, Xie Lian bid farewell to Shi Qingxuan, who promised he’d descend in a few days to visit and hang out, then walked out of the Palace of Divine Might sighing to himself.

They say the Palace of Ling Wen is inefficient, but it can’t be helped. Every time we gather to discuss anything, there’s so much noise and ambiguity, and in the end the conclusions are never concrete. How can the Palace of Ling Wen accomplish anything when this is what we give them to work with?

Just then, he sensed someone approaching from behind, and he turned to see Feng Xin. Slightly taken aback, he hadn’t even greeted Feng Xin before Feng Xin hastily gave him a warning under his breath.

“Watch out for Mu Qing.”

Xie Lian hushed his voice as well. “Mu Qing?”

“That ghost woman reacted oddly when he entered the hall, like she was afraid of him,” Feng Xin said. “I don’t care to pry into other people’s personal affairs, but in any case, watch yourself.”

He hurried off after having his say, leaving Xie Lian standing in place. Xie Lian waited until Feng Xin was gone before he started walking again.

Even though he hadn’t shown as much, Xie Lian had actually paid close attention to every heavenly official’s minute behaviors, as well as Lan Chang’s reactions. Naturally, he hadn’t missed Mu Qing.

However, he didn’t think the father of the fetus spirit was likely to be Mu Qing; Xie Lian couldn’t imagine him doing such a thing. Mu Qing undeniably focused his whole heart and mind on cultivation, improving his martial arts, expanding his territory, and growing his believer base. Furthermore, he and Xie Lian practiced the same cultivation method, and Mu Qing would never even consider ruining his cultivation by touching a woman. However, Mu Qing clearly knew Lan Chang—that was definitely true. But with so few clues, Xie Lian could only shake his head and descend from the Heavenly Court.

With the fetus spirit subdued and Lang Ying and Guzi settled in the wealthy merchant’s abode with food and drink, there was nothing to worry about. Nevertheless, it wasn’t good to be away for too long. If Xie Lian took his time returning, the wealthy merchant would probably start grousing about his absence. Thus, the moment Xie Lian descended, he went straight to the town of Puqi. When the wealthy merchant saw him, he immediately clutched his hands and cried out in excitement.

“Daozhang! You’re a master, a master! You slept in my concubine’s chambers last night and the doors were all locked, yet this morning when we opened them, I couldn’t believe my eyes! You’d disappeared into thin air! Strong! Too strong! So?! Did you catch the monster?”

“It is caught, don’t worry. Everything is fine now,” Xie Lian replied. “How are the two children I brought with me?”

It was like the wealthy merchant had received absolution, and he cried joyously, “Good, they’re very good kids! They didn’t eat much at all! Daozhang, where’s your Thousand Lights Temple? I’m gonna donate and offer my gratitude! From today onward, I will proudly wear my title as one of your temple’s devotees, and let none dispute that devotion!”

Xie Lian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, but no matter what, he had increased his number of worshippers—and this one was rich too, so he was feeling rather glad. He lectured the wealthy merchant on the topic of virtue, discouraged him from continuing to chase lascivious pleasures, and advised him to be more devoted and loving to his wife and family. Finally, he told him to visit Puqi Shrine on another day, after which Xie Lian left with Lang Ying and Guzi in tow.

The trio returned to Puqi Village. Xie Lian placed that *“Please donate and help with renovations”* sign in a more conspicuous spot in front of Puqi Shrine, in hopes that when the wealthy merchant came he would see it straightaway. But the moment he pushed open the doors to enter the shrine, he sensed something different about the place.

As they entered the shrine, indeed, it was vastly different. The floors had been swept, the altar table and chairs wiped, the dust cleared, and even the trash in the corner had been cleaned out. It was like the River Snail Girl[11] had paid a visit; everything was *too* clean—even Qi Rong was gone!

With Qi Rong’s disappearance, it was like the entire place had become that much more spacious and bright; even the air had cleared somewhat. In his arms, Guzi was carrying meat pies he had especially brought from town, and when he peeked in and didn’t see anyone, he grew anxious.

“Da-gege, where’s my dad?”

Xie Lian immediately turned. He hadn’t even stepped out the door before he sensed the chilling glint of an oncoming assault. He instantly drew Fangxin to strike back. *Clang!* That chilling glint was struck high into the air, falling to the ground dozens of meters away.

He had unsheathed Fangxin as fast as lightning and sheathed it with equal speed. He let out a puff of breath but was immediately puzzled.

That's it? No more follow-up moves?

He went to inspect said chilling glint properly. After he struck, it had wound up crookedly planted in the earth. The curved silver arch seemed more and more familiar as he closed the distance between them. Xie Lian brought the two children over, and when he clearly saw the blade, he immediately knelt beside it.

"Isn't… Isn't this Eming?" he exclaimed. "What's wrong?"

Asking a scimitar "what's wrong" was an extremely odd sight. A few farmers walking past gave Xie Lian odd looks and elbowed each other surreptitiously.

"Look at that man, he's talking to a blade…"

"Yeah, I see it. Don't bother with him, let's get outta here…"

But Xie Lian had to ask, because Eming's entire blade body was shaking violently, even the silver-lined eye on the hilt. It shook harder by the minute, like it had contracted a deadly disease.

Xie Lian reached out in spite of himself, worried. "Did I hurt you just now?"

Chapter 48:
Fight for Commendation, Eming Battles Ruoye

THE SCIMITAR SHOOK more and more uncontrollably. Xie Lian was at a loss for how to respond, and he gently stroked along the blade's spine.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I didn't see it was you. I won't do it again."

After stroking it a few times, Eming's eye squinted, and the trembling finally stopped.

Xie Lian then asked, "Where's your master?"

Suddenly, a voice came from behind. "Pay it no mind."

Xie Lian looked back and immediately rose to his feet, surprised and delighted. "San Lang? What brings you here?"

Behind him was a youth who strolled easily toward Xie Lian with an air of playful arrogance. It was Hua Cheng. He had once more tied his black hair into a crooked ponytail and was dressed in a white tunic, his red outer jacket tied around his waist; his sleeves were rolled up, revealing those firm, pale white arms, and the tattoo on one of them. As he walked, the little silver bells on his boots jingled capriciously. He looked very much like a strapping, free-spirited lad next door. He smiled at Xie Lian, a stalk of grass dangling from his lips.

"Gege."

Xie Lian had originally planned on visiting Hua Cheng to give proper thanks after settling the two children, but here he had showed up first. Lazily, Hua Cheng sauntered to his side and pulled the silver scimitar from the ground with a single hand. He looked it over, then rested it on his shoulder.

"Gege is busy here. There's no need to trouble yourself to make the trip when I can come over on my own. You also forgot this."

A bamboo hat hung on Hua Cheng's back, and he removed it to hand it over. Xie Lian had forgotten it at the mansion of the wealthy merchant, and he was slightly taken aback.

"It completely slipped my mind," he hurriedly said. "Thanks for going to the trouble."

As he spoke, he suddenly remembered what he had told Hua Cheng after a certain incident the night before: *"I'm looking for my bamboo hat, my bamboo hat is missing."*

This had been nonsense uttered in a state of confusion, but Hua Cheng actually had gone and found his bamboo hat. Xie Lian felt a wave of embarrassment and feared Hua Cheng would tease him for it. Fortunately, Hua Cheng didn't even mention the incident and changed the subject with a smile.

"Gege picked up two more kids?" he commented as he patted Guzi's head, ruffling his hair into a mess.

Guzi seemed to be scared of Hua Cheng, and he rushed to hide behind Xie Lian.

Xie Lian chided him, "Don't worry, this gege is a good person."

"Nah, I'm a very bad person." Hua Cheng replied.

Although that was what he said, he flicked his hand and a tiny silver butterfly flipped out of his sleeve; fluttering its little wings, it flew errantly toward Guzi. Guzi's inky little eyes bulged as he stared in fixated wonder at the tiny silver butterfly, and he reached out to try to catch it in spite of himself.

With that, his suspicion toward Hua Cheng dropped significantly. Hua Cheng nonchalantly glanced at Lang Ying, but this gaze was quite different from the one he turned on Guzi. When Hua Cheng looked at Lang Ying, his eyes were cold and sharp, utterly unfriendly. Lang Ying lowered his head and shrank behind Xie Lian anxiously.

"If you're gonna come, just come," Xie Lian said, bamboo hat in hand. "What are you doing cleaning Puqi Shrine?"

"It was just a bit of tidying," Hua Cheng replied. "Don't you think everything feels so much more refreshing now that all the trash is cleared out?"

"…"

Xie Lian remembered the missing Qi Rong and wondered, *Did Hua Cheng actually throw him out with the garbage?*

There was a sudden wail from behind Puqi Shrine.

“HUA CHENG, YOU FUCKER, GO TO HELL AND GET BOILED IN A POT OF FRYING OIL! MURDER! HUA CHENG IS COMMITTING MURDER!”

Guzi cried, “Dad!”

He dashed over on his little legs, and Xie Lian hastily followed. A small creek ran behind Puqi Shrine; it was where Xie Lian usually did laundry and washed rice. At the moment, it was instead Qi Rong who was being dunked in the water, his body bound tightly by Ruoye. He desperately tried to keep his head above water and roared for all he was worth.

“I WON’T GET OUT, I REFUSE TO GET OUT! I will stay in this body until it dies! I won’t surrender!”

Hua Cheng spat out the stalk of grass. “You take yourself for some kind of a hero? Useless trash.”

“…I captured him a few days ago on some mountain,” Xie Lian explained woefully. “He’s possessing someone and won’t come out. The man is still alive, so if we forcibly rip out Qi Rong’s soul, the flesh won’t survive. Honestly…does San Lang have any idea what we can do?”

“Hm? You want ideas on how to make him suffer a fate worse than death?” Hua Cheng asked. “There’s plenty of options.”

That was obviously a threat. Qi Rong cussed.

“YOU TWO! Broken pot with a rotten cover to match! Hearts of snakes and scorpions! *Gurgle gurgle gurgle*…”

He hadn’t finished before he was submerged in the creek again. Whenever Xie Lian saw Qi Rong, he was filled with both anger and sorrow, remembering how his mother’s corpse had dissolved to ash. Nevertheless, that body belonged to another, so it had to be preserved. Thus, he fished Qi Rong from the creek and dragged him to the front door of Puqi Shrine.

Qi Rong hadn’t eaten for a full day and night, so his stomach was shriveled with hunger. After Hua Cheng’s bullying, he was full of rage but had no energy. Appearing truly wretched and pathetic, he wolfed down the meat pies Guzi had snuck back from the wealthy merchant’s house, leaving not a single crumb. Xie Lian shook his head. He noticed that Qi Rong’s limbs were stiff, probably from some petrification spell cast by Hua Cheng.

“Ruoye, return,” Xie Lian called.

Ruoye had spent days binding Qi Rong and was feeling extremely aggrieved for it. With that call, it immediately whooshed over and wrapped itself in loops around Xie Lian’s whole body like a white snake. Xie Lian pushed open the door and comforted it as he did so, untying it from his person.

“All right, all right. I’ll give you a bath in a bit, don’t feel bad. Go play over there.”

Thus, Ruoye dragged its bandages and listlessly floated to the side. Hua Cheng also casually tossed Eming over, and Eming assumed a dignified pose upon landing. Ruoye had been moping facing the wall, but it suddenly discovered a shimmering silver scimitar leaning against that same wall. It very carefully approached. The eye on Eming’s hilt twirled and looked over, its gaze calculating.

Fangxin remained somber and unmoved, making no show of acknowledging anything.

Xie Lian had spent the past few days studying up on cooking and felt he had perhaps gained considerable insight; his heart was full of confidence. Wanting to show off his skills and properly host Hua Cheng, Xie Lian bade him stay for a meal, to which Hua Cheng of course cheerfully agreed. Xie Lian had bought a bunch of groceries on the way back from town, and he piled them on the altar. Picking up the butcher knife, he chopped and sliced, the pots clinking and clanking. The altar table could be used as a desk, kitchen island, and dining table as well; cutlery could be set upon it, children could sit all around. One could say it was a table of a hundred uses.

Hua Cheng leaned against the wall and watched for a bit. Finally, he couldn’t watch anymore and spoke. “Do you need help?”

Xie Lian was at the height of his fervor and dismissed him. “No need. Ruoye’s help is plenty.”

To demonstrate, he threw out a few bundles of firewood that hadn't yet been chopped. *Pah!* Like an attacking viper, the white silk bandage whipped the logs, and chunks of wood originally thick as thighs were instantly chopped into thin sticks of kindling.

Having shown off its skills, Ruoye arched into an odd, exaggerated form in front of Eming and Fangxin, like it was demonstrating its strength and beauty. Said demonstration didn't last long—Xie Lian moved again to place a plate on the ground before tossing over a big cabbage. Ruoye was just about to strike when suddenly, Eming's eye flashed. It flew off the ground and whirled out shimmers of silver light. Leaves of cabbage filled the air, and they landed on the plate thinly and cleanly chopped. Xie Lian squatted to pick up the plate and praised Eming aloud when he saw the results.

"Amazing. You cut better than Ruoye!"

Ruoye instantly pressed itself against the wall, looking like someone backing away with nowhere left to run. Eming spun its eye wildly and appeared fully smug, as if it were floating on cloud nine. Fangxin continued to remain unmoved.

Xie Lian hadn't noticed the little battle between the spiritual weapons, so focused was he on dropping all sorts of different vegetables and seasonings into the pot. However, he still had the mind to ask, "By the way, San Lang, how long are you staying this time?"

Hua Cheng had been observing Xie Lian the entire time; he looked like he wanted to advise him in some way at first, but in the end he smiled and said nothing of the sort.

"Depends. If nothing's going on in Ghost City, I'll stick around to play for a few days. I hope gege won't mind me hanging around."

"Why would I?" Xie Lian hastily assured him. "As long as you don't mind my place being a bit cramped."

Xie Lian chattered animatedly, telling Hua Cheng all about how Lan Chang threw around blame and caused trouble the moment she set foot in the Palace of Divine Might. Of course, he refrained from mentioning how he himself had been accused, as well as the whole business with dripping blood on Yanzhen. Then again, he remembered Jun Wu saying Hua Cheng had planted a spy in the Heavenly Realm, so maybe Hua Cheng already knew everything that had transpired. Fortunately, Hua Cheng only looked contemplative and made no show of whether or not he already knew.

Xie Lian asked idly, "San Lang, who do you think the father of the fetus spirit is?"

Hua Cheng looked up and smiled faintly. "Hard to say. Maybe that Golden Belt really was just something she picked up off the ground."

A vague response like that wasn't remotely Hua Cheng's usual style, and it rather puzzled Xie Lian. But soon, the bubbling pot stole his focus.

After two incense time, he opened the cover to the pot.

Usually, all Qi Rong ate were offerings that the villagers had made to Xie Lian. It was never anything more than steamed buns and pickles, noodles and eggs, wild fruits and such other things, but at least it was food fit for humans. The moment the pot cover opened and the smell of its contents wafted outside Puqi Shrine, Qi Rong started screaming curses.

"GOD FUCKING XIE LIAN! BLACKHEARTED SNOW LOTUS! You might as well just stab me dead right now! So acting good by fishing me out was all to make me suffer this torture?! I'VE SEEN THROUGH YOU!"

Before opening the pot cover, Xie Lian had been full of confidence. Now he doubted himself again—he had tried his best and exerted so much effort, but it had still resulted in this…entrée. Hua Cheng was watching; whatever should he do? Was he really going to make Hua Cheng eat something like this?! Listening to Qi Rong scream bloody murder, Xie Lian became even more demoralized. Seeing that Hua Cheng had crossed his arms and was about to go outside, Xie Lian raised a hand to stop him.

“Never mind him.” Xie Lian sighed and portioned out a bowl of the substance that had formed within the pot. “Don’t eat anything from this pot. Just wait for me for a second.”

Then he went outside. He ushered Guzi and Lang Ying to go get a bucket of water, sending them away from the premises. Xie Lian squatted down with the bowl, looking pleasant and airy.

“Little cousin, it’s time to eat.”

Qi Rong was shocked and terrified in equal measure. “What. What are you doing?! WHAT ARE YOU PLANNING?! Xie Lian, I’m warning you, a human life is at stake here! YOU BETTER THINK THIS THROUGH! Whoever the hell can stomach that shit will break free from the bondage of the Three Realms, flee the wheel of dharma, no one…”

Qi Rong trailed off when he saw Hua Cheng ladle himself a full bowl, then sit next to the altar table inside the shrine and take a bite, his face unchanging and steady as the mountains. Qi Rong was shaken to the core. A thought he’d never had before flashed through his mind:

As expected of a supreme!

Xie Lian pushed the bowl against Qi Rong’s face as he said calmly, “It’s fine if you don’t want to eat it. As long as you come out, that is.”

That was never going to happen. Qi Rong clamped his teeth shut, but Xie Lian squeezed his cheeks and easily forced open his mouth, dumping the contents of the bowl straight down his throat.

A sharp scream shot to the skies above Puqi Shrine.

The bowl in Xie Lian’s hand sat empty. Qi Rong lay sprawled on the ground, wearing a twisted, scrunched-up expression. Even his voice was hoarse, like an old man wasting away.

“…I…hate…”

Seeing as Qi Rong still refused to exit the body even with a full bowl of Xie Lian's cooking forced down his throat, Xie Lian didn't know whether to be reassured or anguished. He really wanted to force Qi Rong out as soon as possible, but since he hadn't succeeded…it almost seemed to prove that this dish he had cooked with all his heart wasn't so bad after all. Perhaps it was even worth being proud of. Turning around, Xie Lian saw that the bowl in Hua Cheng's hand was almost empty. He was eating leisurely, looking at Xie Lian as he did. Xie Lian's eyes lit up, and he rose to his feet.

"San Lang, are you finished?"

He thought he had botched the meal at first and been too embarrassed to offer it to Hua Cheng. Who knew Hua Cheng would take the initiative to help himself?

Hua Cheng chuckled.

"Yeah."

"…" Xie Lian prodded very carefully for his opinion. "What did you think?"

Hua Cheng slurped up the remaining broth and smiled. "Not bad. The taste is a bit strong; try making it a little milder next time."

Xie Lian sighed a breath of relief and nodded. "All right, I'll remember that. Thanks for your feedback."

Qi Rong groaned, "UUUUGGGGGHHHHHHHHH!"

Chapter 49:

Stew of the Good Crown Prince, to Welcome Unexpected Guests

XIE LIAN HAD PLANNED TO SHOW OFF his culinary skills, but after this evening's events, his confidence had risen and plunged in equal measure. Hua Cheng suggested he make dinner instead, but how could Xie Lian have the face to ask him to cook after Hua Cheng had already fixed his door and cleaned his shrine? Who in their right mind would treat their guest this way, and furthermore, who did he take an esteemed Supreme Ghost King for?

Fortunately, he'd brought plenty of supplies back from town. While a large portion had gone into Xie Lian's pot, some buns and pies still remained, as well as fruits and vegetables, so they munched on what they had. But after those were eaten, what then?

The next day, the problem was solved on its own. Bright and early in the morning, the door of Puqi Shrine rattled with the knocking of a gaggle of village girls who had come offering several large pots of congee and a roasted chicken. The village girls were shy and nervous, so who they'd really come to see was quite obvious.

Xie Lian couldn't help but sigh in awe as he thought, *Beauty really can fill a stomach.*

The roasted chicken was divided between the two children; Xie Lian only had some congee while Hua Cheng didn't touch a thing.

"Gege is quite popular around here," Hua Cheng commented with a smile.

"Don't tease me, San Lang," Xie Lian laughed. "They were obviously drunk, but not on wine."

After Qi Rong took the contents of that bowl down his throat yesterday, he suffered and struggled outside the shrine the entire night, wailing nonstop and yelling things along the lines of:

"I'd rather be captured by Lang Qianqiu and butchered into a million pieces than be stuck here and fed your poison!"

"Cousin Crown Prince, I was wrong. Please, I beg you, give me the antidote!"

As the night went on, it seemed that he eventually started hallucinating and became delusional; little Guzi was horrified as he listened. By early morning, Qi Rong was shriveled and drained, his face completely ashen. Only after he slurped a bit of congee from Guzi's cupped palm did he finally regain some strength.

"Popular, my ass! Who the hell would come for him?!" he croaked with a broken voice. "Look at that shabby appearance! And don't you be so full of yourself, Hua Cheng, you fucker. At most you could only attract bumpkin chicks from backwater towns like these. They only came simpering along because you're dressed so extravagantly. If you dressed the part of a beggar, I doubt they'd spare you a glance!"

Xie Lian thought that wasn't right at all; even if Hua Cheng dressed like a pauper, he would surely collect a mountain of gold should he go begging. Still, he said nothing and started leisurely doing chores. After a while, another wave of smells wafted outside, and Qi Rong roared out curses anew.

"What are you doing now?! What the hell!"

"It's that pot of 'Love for All Seasons' stew," Xie Lian replied warmly. "I'm heating it up."

Hua Cheng applauded quietly at this. "What a good name."

Qi Rong screeched, "YOU GAVE THAT FUCKING SHIT A NAME?! STOP!"

The mere smell of the reheating brew made Qi Rong recall memories most terrifying, so there wasn't really a need to feed him; Qi Rong didn't dare speak another word. Once the meal was finished, Lang Ying silently collected the cutlery, seeming like he intended to do the dishes.

"Let it be," Xie Lian chided him, "Just go play. I can take care of this."

Maybe he wasn't allowed to cook, but he could still do dishes. Hua Cheng watched Lang Ying take Guzi outside.

"Let me do that for you," Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian declined the offer. "There's even less reason for you to trouble yourself. Just sit."

As he spoke, they heard a ruckus outside. Qi Rong had gotten bored with nothing to do after filling his stomach, and he'd started catcalling.

"Hey chickee, what're you doin', checking me out?" Qi Rong cooed greasily. "Did I make your tender little heart quiver?"

He'd just been griping about how he didn't care for country girls, only to turn around and start flirting—and so tastelessly too! Xie Lian shook his head, thinking it would be best to drag Qi Rong inside after all, lest he scare people while tied up out there.

Before he even opened the door, he heard awed comments from the villagers.

"Whoa, what legendary beauties!"

"Why would such beautiful girls come to our village…?"

"I've never seen such pretty ladies, not in my whole life! And there's two of them!"

Soon after, there was the sound of knocking, and it surprisingly came upon the door of Puqi Shrine. Xie Lian was puzzled.

Legendary beauties? Two of them? Why would two legendary beauties come knocking on my door? Xie Lian then realized, *Ah, could it be—did that wealthy merchant get some new wives and bring them to show their gratitude?*

Thinking that this could very well be the case, Xie Lian quickly grabbed for the *"Please donate to help with renovations of this shrine"* sign, ready to set it outside. But he then heard one of the women speak in a frosty tone.

"What's this thing at the door? What an eyesore."

Immediately the puzzled voice of another woman followed. "Maybe it's for guarding the door? No way. No one would ever have a reason to sink so low, to use such a vulgar spiritual beast…”

Although they were women’s voices, Xie Lian had heard them before. It was Wind Master Qingxuan and Earth Master Yi!

At first, he wanted to open the door. Then he whipped his head around to look at Hua Cheng, who was languidly cleaning up the altar table behind him. Xie Lian stopped his hands, cautiously peeking out the door’s crack instead.

Outside the door stood two tall, slender women. One was a white-robed Daoist priestess with a whisk in hand, her lips rosy, her eyes bright, her form sensually graceful. The other was a woman clad in black, her skin snow white and her face beautifully sharp. She wore an upset expression as she glowered into the distance, her hands folded behind her back. The white-robed Daoist priestess had a face full of smiles, cupping her hands to salute her thanks to all around.

“Ha ha, thanks, everyone, thank you! No need to compliment us so much, no need to make such a scene! It gets me all flustered when you fuss over me! That’s enough now, thank you, ha ha…”

Xie Lian had no words. “…”

A large, tightly packed crowd of beauty-watching villagers was outside, and once they were done looking at the beauties, they started pointing and jeering at Qi Rong, to the latter’s great displeasure.

“WHAT ARE YOU ALL LOOKIN’ AT?!” he screamed maniacally. “So what if this ancestor likes lying on the ground?! FUCK OFF! There’s nothin’ to see here!”

When the villagers saw how bizarrely the man behaved—how fiendish he looked with that sickly green face—they dispersed in a fright.

Shi Qingxuan looked Qi Rong over.

“This…green gongzi, pray tell, is His Highness the Crown Prince inside the shrine?”

Hearing her address Xie Lian as “His Highness the Crown Prince,” Qi Rong immediately lost interest in the two beautiful women before him. He clicked his tongue.

“*Tsk!* So you’re some goddamn officials from the Upper Court! As if this ancestor is a dog guarding his door. Listen here, I am…”

He hadn’t finished his introduction before Ming Yi glumly approached. There was a wail, followed by sounds of smacking. From Xie Lian’s position, he couldn’t discern exactly what Ming Yi was doing and could only see Shi Qingxuan sweep her whisk as she chided her companion.

“Ming-xiong, it’s not good to use violence!”

“What’s there to be afraid of?” Ming Yi asked coolly. “Didn’t he say he’s not a domesticated spiritual beast?”

“…”

To prevent Qi Rong from getting beaten to death, Xie Lian had no choice but to open the door. He raised his hands to stop Ming Yi.

“My Lord! Have mercy! Don’t hit him, he’s a person!”

When Xie Lian opened the door, Ming Yi flipped away her black hem and removed her boot from Qi Rong’s back. Shi Qingxuan cupped her hands in courtesy.

“Your Highness, I’ve come a few days early! What’s with this person? He’s so full of ghost qi that it’s impossible to hide; do you take us for blind?” Shi Qingxuan changed the subject. “Anyway, let’s talk inside. I’ve something really important I need your help with…”

She made her way around Qi Rong’s prone body as she spoke and was about to cross over the threshold—but Hua Cheng was still inside! How could Xie Lian possibly let them in?

“Wait!” he cried hastily.

However, it was too late. Puqi Shrine was only so big, and it had no places to hide. Shi Qingxuan and Ming Yi immediately saw that behind Xie Lian there stood a Supreme Ghost King, who was in the middle of doing dishes. Four pairs of eyes met; sparks flew. Hua Cheng smiled a smile that showed his teeth. The smile was ominous, and his eyes held no trace of mirth.

In an instant, Ming Yi’s pupils shrank, and she backed a meter away. Exceedingly alarmed, Shi Qingxuan flung out her Wind Master fan to strike an attacking stance.

"Crimson Rain Sought Flower!"

Outside the door, the ashen-faced Qi Rong roared with rage. "AND I'M THE NIGHT-TOURING GREEN LANTERN! How come none of you recognized me when kicking the shit out of me, but you knew it was him with just one look?!"

Ming Yi had infiltrated Ghost City and spent many years as a spy under Hua Cheng. Only recently had she been discovered and captured, and subsequently locked in a labyrinthine dungeon and beaten to a pulp. Now the two enemies faced each other once more, their eyes bloodshot. Tiny little Puqi Shrine was filled with the scent of venom inside and out. Hua Cheng lightly tossed the rag in his hand and smirked.

"Lord Earth Master looks lively."

"And Lord Ghost King looks leisurely as always," Ming Yi replied coldly.

After exchanging these false perfunctory greetings, the next words that came out of Hua Cheng's mouth were even colder, and his expression turned positively glacial.

"Leave," he warned. "I don't care what 'important' business you have. Do not come anywhere near here again."

Although Ming Yi feared Hua Cheng, she refused to back down without a fight. She responded, her tone gravely serious, "Coming here was not my will!"

The venom was turning explosive, and Xie Lian grew nervous next to them.

"Wh-wh-what…? Lord Wind Master, what should we do?"

Shi Qingxuan knocked her fan on her head a few times. "I didn't expect Crimson Rain Sought Flower to be here!" she sighed. "Didn't you guys just meet up recently? How come you're palling around again so soon? Anyway, it'd be great if this could be solved without throwing fists. Violence is bad. If they start fighting, we'll have to hold them back."

Xie Lian replied, "I agree, mostly."

Qi Rong had been listening intently, as he was hoping the pair would start brawling. When he heard this, he suddenly spoke up. "Ohhh… So you're that tramp Wind Master?!"

Both Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan turned to look at him. That was exactly how Qi Rong had referred to Shi Qingxuan when he was lounging in his cave, but he'd dared address her like that even in front of the lady herself! Xie Lian couldn't decide whether it stemmed from an excess of bravery or a deficit of intelligence.

Shi Qingxuan had always been raised in dignified grace, so this was probably the first time she'd ever heard such an insult. She blinked, looking confused, then turned to Xie Lian.

"Your Highness, please wait."

Then she exited the shrine and closed the door. Outside, there was a shriek from Qi Rong and another bout of smacking noises. A moment later, Shi Qingxuan opened the door to come back in; he had returned to his male form.

"All right, where were we? I'm feeling kind of hungry, so how about we all sit down and eat something?" he declared. "There's nothing that can't be negotiated and nothing that can't be solved at the dinner table."

"…"

Xie Lian didn't want anyone to start fighting inside Puqi Shrine, but Hua Cheng seemed extremely angry over the matter of Ming Yi's infiltration. Without knowing the inside story, it seemed rather impossible to have them sit down and share a peaceful meal. However, Hua Cheng actually didn't seem to object to the idea. After a long moment, the frost in his expression cleared, and he turned to continue doing dishes. Once he finished, he walked to the pot and ladled a full bowl of that Love for All Seasons stew.

As he withdrew and thereby put a stop to the imminent battle, the rest sighed a breath of relief. The next step was to change the subject and liven the mood.

So, Shi Qingxuan asked, "Your Highness, what's in that pot? It seems to still be hot."

"Oh. I made that," Xie Lian said.

The pot had been stewing for a long time; the flavors were completely soaked in and most of the smell had dissipated. Although the color was questionable, the shapes had all but melted away, and it looked so much better than it had the night before.

Shi Qingxuan vibrated with excitement when he heard this reply.

“Really? I’ve never eaten anything prepared by the hands of a heavenly official! Come, come, come, let’s have a taste.”

He grabbed some spoons and filled two bowls. Xie Lian wanted to stop him, to be honest. But Hua Cheng had been so consistently encouraging, burying seeds of confidence within him. Also, earlier that morning as he heated the stew, he’d changed the preparation according to Hua Cheng’s suggestions. A thought surfaced in his mind, *Perhaps I saved it.*

After some hesitation, he decided not to say anything. He watched with secret anticipation as Shi Qingxuan passed one of the bowls to Ming Yi.

“Come, Ming-xiong. This one’s yours.”

Ming Yi took a look at the contents of the bowl, then turned her face away, looking wholly unwilling. It was a little rude. Shi Qingxuan was outraged and unrelentingly forced the bowl in her face.

“Eat! Didn’t you say you were hungry on the road earlier?!”

Hua Cheng lazily raised a spoonful and blew on it. He brought it to his lips, then swallowed and smiled at Xie Lian.

“It’s definitely milder today. The flavor’s just right.”

Xie Lian smiled too. “Really? I added more water today.”

Hua Cheng took another bite and beamed. “Gege did his best.”

Hua Cheng behaved as though he were tasting some delicious delicacy, and he was incredibly convincing to behold. A moment later, Ming Yi took the bowl after all. Shi Qingxuan smiled.

“That’s better!”

The pair spooned mouthfuls of the stew at the same time and swallowed them down.

Chapter 50:
Venerable of Empty Words, Mourning at the Celebration

"HOW IS IT?" Xie Lian asked.

Thud!

Ming Yi collapsed onto the altar table facedown as if she'd lost consciousness. Next to her, two lines of silent tears streamed down Shi Qingxuan's face.

"…" Xie Lian hesitantly pressed them, "My Lords, how is it exactly? Can you collect your thoughts and give me some constructive criticism using your words?"

Shi Qingxuan snapped out of it. He wiped away his tears, then clutched Xie Lian's hands, squeezing them with force. He said, nigh unintelligibly, "Your Highness…"

Xie Lian reversed the hold and clutched Shi Qingxuan's hands back. "What?"

Shi Qingxuan was lisping and couldn't speak. A moment later, he let out a sob and pushed Ming Yi.

"Ming-xiong…Ming-xiong! Ming-xiong, what's wrong? Get ahold of yourself, wake up!"

Ming Yi lay unmoving on the table. Shi Qingxuan could never stand anyone ignoring him, so one thing led to another until he was strangling Ming Yi, shaking her violently.

Xie Lian couldn't watch this anymore, and he gently pointed out, "Lord Wind Master, why don't you put down the broom and we can talk things out?"

Shi Qingxuan was busy strangling that broom, and he whipped his head around to shout, "*Hah?* Your highness, what did you say?! *I can't hear you!*"

Feeling a little helpless, Xie Lian yelled into his ear, "Lord Wind Master! The thing in your hands is not Lord Earth Master! Lord Earth

Master is here! *Here!*”

Just then, Ming Yi sat bolt upright. He returned to his male form in a flash. His face was as dark as iron, and his words bore down on Xie Lian oppressively.

“My heart has been overtaken by inner demons. Please exorcise them for me.”

A spoonful of stew could cause a demon infestation of the heart?! Xie Lian was shocked to the core. He mumbled, “That can’t be possible…”

Shi Qingxuan pointed at Ming Yi, his eyes round and bulging. “Hold it! You! What manner of evil are you, to dare flaunt your petty tricks before this Wind Master? Where’s Ming-xiong?! Quick, I’ll shield you! Let’s take it down together!”

Broom in one hand, She Qingxuan flung out the Wind Master fan in the other. If he attacked with that fan, then the entire roof would be blown away for sure! Xie Lian hastily rushed over to hold him down.

“Don’t, don’t, don’t! My Lords, please, will you both snap out of it?!”

“Ha ha ha ha, he he he he he, eh he, eh he, hue hue hue hue…!” Qi Rong slammed his fists on the ground outside as he shrieked with laughter. “Y’all deserved it! Damn officials! Go die and ascend! THIS IS FUCKING GREAT! I FEEL SO VINDICATED!”

The two officials inside fell over themselves and groaned nonstop. Hua Cheng leaned against the wall with his arms crossed. Xie Lian looked at him, then at the Wind Master and Earth Master, who were curled up into balls on the ground and clutching their heads.

“Is it maybe because I didn’t add enough water after all…?” he murmured. “Why are their reactions stronger than Qi Rong’s?”

Hua Cheng arched his eyebrows. “I think it’s fine. It’s probably a problem with their taste buds. It happens.”

Xie Lian had never thought much about the difference between Qi Rong’s usual diet and that of heavenly officials, but comparing the two now made clear an obvious disparity in taste. It was only logical that a heavenly official’s shock in this case would be greater, which meant their reactions were naturally far stronger.

Of course, it never crossed Xie Lian’s mind that anything could have been added to the pot after it passed through Hua Cheng’s hands…

Feeling both depressed and guilty, Xie Lian fed Shi Qingxuan and Ming Yi seven or eight bowls of water apiece before they slowly came around. Although their complexions were sickly green like Qi Rong’s, and their eyes dead, at least they were conscious and their speech returned. The only lingering problems were the unstoppable tears streaming down Shi Qingxuan’s face, and that when he spoke, he occasionally accidentally bit his tongue. Other than that, there weren’t any real issues.

After all that ruckus, two hours later, the four finally sat down around the altar table properly. Ming Yi still had his face down on the altar, still like a corpse.

Xie Lian schooled his expression and inquired solemnly, “Lord Wind Master, you said there was something important you wanted my help with. What is it exactly?”

Shi Qingxuan, looking haggard, flung a soundproofing spell on the door to ensure that no one outside could hear a word of their discussion.

“…It’s like this,” he croaked with a hoarse voice. “*Ahem, ahem. Ahem, ahem.* Your Highness, you’ve been living in the bustling world of mortals, cultivating within their realm for eight hundred years. You’ve walked and seen much, so you must have encountered a vast number of nefarious beings, right?”

Xie Lian crossed his arms. “I’ve met some.”

“Then I want to ask, have… Have you ever encountered a Venerable of Empty Words?”

Xie Lian was taken aback. “A Venerable of Empty Words—the creature that mourns at feasts?”

“That’s right!” Shi Qingxuan’s voice had dropped to a hush.

Xie Lian felt a hair-raising, cold breeze blow up his spine, swishing his locks. At the same time, someone seemed to be next to his ear, giggling and humming an exceedingly creepy tune. Little Puqi Shrine was always awash in the warmth of sunlight peeking through its windows and cracks, but even this had dimmed, as if the entirety had been enveloped by a great shadow. Xie Lian’s limbs and fingers grew as cold as iron.

“…”

“…”

“…”

Xie Lian clutched his robes tight in spite of himself and felt the need to voice his concern.

“I have to ask… Who’s laughing? Who’s singing? Who’s blowing cold air up my back? Who made the shrine this dark?”

Shi Qingxuan wiped away his tears. “Oh, that’s all me. It’s just a little spell, don’t mind it. Just setting the mood.”

The other three at the altar table were speechless. Moments later, Xie Lian put his hand to his forehead in exasperation.

“…Lord Wind Master, how about we stop with the breeze? None of us are wearing layers in this weather. Besides, the mood before was perfectly fine…until the cold air and music ruined it.”

“Huh? Really?” Shi Qingxuan asked. With a wave of his hand, the cold air blowing up everyone’s backs dispersed. “But I think it’ll be good if the shrine remains this dark. Let me light a candle, the ambiance will be even better.”

As he spoke, he really did take out a candle and light it. The flickering candlelight illuminated two snow-white complexions and two pale greenish faces. The mood improved considerably; the haunting atmosphere was exceptional. Perhaps even Qi Rong, still tied up outside, would squawk and scream in fright.

The other three were no longer inclined to make further commentary. Hua Cheng leaned back, and Ming Yi remained like a stiff corpse.

“Let’s continue… Where were we?” Xie Lian rubbed his forehead. “The Venerable of Empty Words? Why didn’t you just say ‘jinx monster’? It took me a moment to realize what you were talking about when you called it that.”

“Your Highness, what guts you have!” Shi Qingxuan exclaimed in shock. “It’s not very considerate to refer to it as such, is it?”

The Venerable of Empty Words had been bequeathed a respectful title, but people only addressed it as “venerable” for show. If its given name were too unseemly, people feared that the creature would overhear and retaliate. The truth was, everyone wished they could curse it as “the foul-mouthed immortal” or “the jinx monster.” The worse the moniker, the better, because it really was abominable in the extreme.

That’s right, normal nefarious creatures were frightening, but this one was abominable. If someone was happy, in their moment of joy, it would appear to dump a bucket of cold water over their head—a killjoy in the most literal of terms. Consider, for a moment, the following scenario: this creature appears at the reception for a pair of newlyweds to gobble up the feast and suddenly declare, “It won’t be long before the two of you divorce!” Or as another example: this creature appears just as the master of a household receives a promotion in office and cries out in the midst of all the congratulations, “In just a few years, you’ll be cuffed and sent to jail!”

If it latched itself on to someone, it would become like their shadow, endlessly predicting future misery whenever a joyous occasion should occur. Truly abominable, especially for the superstitious sort who feared ominous signs; if they ran into the thing, they’d surely die from distress alone. No one wanted to be haunted by a monster like this, but if one were unfortunate enough to cross paths with it, one could only accept their fate. After all, the means by which it selected its prey was a mystery.

It seemed Shi Qingxuan was quite wary of the creature, but Xie Lian didn’t think the beastly thing was such a big deal.

“Don’t worry. It’s nothing to be scared of.”

Such a creature was significantly more likely to be scared of Xie Lian, to be exact.

Shi Qingxuan perked up.

"So Your Highness has met one? Is there any way to exterminate it completely?"

Thinking it over for a moment, Xie Lian replied, "Over the years, I bumped into two, but after our encounters, they never showed themselves again. I don't know for sure whether they were completely exterminated, but in my experience, it's not that difficult to deal with them."

Shi Qingxuan was overjoyed. "Two?! You managed to deal with two?! I've really come to the right person! So what happened?"

Thus Xie Lian began his tales. The first one went like this: Many years ago, Xie Lian passed through a small town. There, a wealthy merchant was sending his daughter to the imperial capital to study, and because of his daughter's outstanding skill, he made a big show of publicly commending her. It was a joyous occasion, but who could have predicted that joy would brew tragedy?

At the send-off feast, a voice bellowed: "Your daughter's carriage will overturn on the road, and she will crash down into the valley and die!"

The wealthy merchant jumped to his feet in a rage, set on catching the one who would say such a thing, but that person ducked under the table immediately and disappeared into thin air!

Afterward, everyone was fearful. Fortunately, Xie Lian went to the merchant's household that day to collect junk. He managed to get some leftovers from the feast and was about to head back when he heard what had happened. He immediately knew what the creature was and told the wealthy merchant not to worry. He then asked the wealthy merchant to hire twenty-some guards, and with Xie Lian himself included, they carefully and safely escorted the little lady to the capital. He guarded the girl for a while, biding his time. A month later, the little lady won first place in a beauty contest, and an opportunity arrived.

That night, a feast was held at a restaurant in the capital to celebrate the little lady. Sure enough, again a voice from the crowd bellowed:

"You will be—"

The moment Xie Lian heard its voice, he immediately seized the creature from the crowd, choking it by the neck to stop it from uttering even a single word. Then he used a talisman to seal its body, and following this, he beat it to a bloody pulp. Next, he ordered a carriage and took it to the valleys to run wildly astray. At a winding corner of a mountain pass, the reins snapped, and the carriage crashed down the cliff, fulfilling its own curse.

“That’s it?” the other three asked.

“That’s it,” Xie Lian said. “To deal with the jinx—all right, the ‘Venerable of Empty Words’—there are three ways to handle it. The first is to not let it open its mouth; cut it off before it can speak. This works in the moment but not in perpetuity, so you need to remain vigilant at all times.

“Second, if it should speak, don’t let the subject of its curse hear. Anyone would be frightened to hear someone cursing them at the height of their joy, and that creature feeds on fear; it revels in it. The more frightened you are, the happier it becomes. If you should lose yourself to terror and ruin your own affairs in accordance with its words, its powers increase significantly. But unless you’re deaf, you’ll definitely hear it speak sooner or later. To be honest, not even the deaf can escape; some have cut off their own ears in an attempt to do so, but in the end, it was still useless.

“However, if you pay no mind to however it tries to curse you or rain on your parade, then it can’t do anything to you. So, the most effective method is the third—surround yourself with happy occasions and ignore it completely. Let it choose to speak or remain silent, but forget everything it says. Make yourself stronger and continue down your path according to your own will, and not in accordance with the tragedy it predicted for you. If it can draw no despair from you, it will eventually leave on its own with its tail between its legs… Of course, it could still very well be lying low, waiting for its next chance to strike.”

Although the third method was the most effective, it was also the most difficult to accomplish. After all, who in the world could truly build such a heart of stone and feel not a single ripple of fear?

The more Shi Qingxuan listened, the harder his brow furrowed.

“Then what about the second time? Did you take care of it the same way then?”

“The second time might not be useful as a reference,” Xie Lian explained. “It was a unique situation, after all.”

“How was it unique?”

“The individual it latched on to was me,” replied Xie Lian.

Many years ago, Xie Lian himself encountered a Venerable of Empty Words.

At the time, he had just finished constructing a small hut by his own handiwork. He was standing there, admiring his new abode, when suddenly a tiny voice came from one of the corners, *“This dwelling of yours will collapse in two months!”*

“So what did you do?” Shi Qingxuan asked.

“Nothing,” Xie Lian replied. “I said, ‘Two months? If it’s still standing in seven days, then it’ll be a real miracle.’”

“…”

Hua Cheng’s lips curved slightly, but that smile quickly faded.

The Venerable of Empty Words hid in the shadows, waiting to feed on Xie Lian’s fear, frustration, insecurity, and other such negative emotions. However, its jaws gnawed on nothing but empty air. Even when Xie Lian finished cleaning and fell asleep in his new house, it still hadn’t managed to suck anything out of him.

Although Xie Lian never saw its form, he could sense that it was probably quite angry.

Not even a few days later, lightning struck and the entire hut was scorched. The Venerable of Empty Words was most pleased, probably thinking “scorched” wasn’t any different from “collapsed”; the curse had technically been fulfilled! Xie Lian surely had to be afraid now. Yet this was not so, and still it couldn’t manage to absorb anything from him to fill its stomach. Refusing to give in, it followed Xie Lian and waited for the next joyous occasion to arise.

But who could’ve known that it would wait for over half a year? In that half a year, Xie Lian experienced not a single joyous occasion!

Anyone else would’ve given up. However, creatures known as Venerables of Empty Words possessed a unique trait, and that was obstinance. They were relentless in their pursuit of their chosen prey, and so it starved pathetically for that half year.

Finally, an opportunity came to pass. One day, Xie Lian managed to collect a large bundle of junk and made a small fortune. The Venerable of Empty Words was overjoyed. Having been thwarted for so long, it passionately launched into a long and rambling string of curses: after Xie Lian struck it rich, he would waste his fortune on gambling and drink, only to fall sick and be trailed by an endless string of debt, and so on. Xie Lian counted his money and listened with indulgent amusement. Afterward, he washed up as he'd always done and went to bed. The Venerable of Empty Words drank nothing.

That night, Xie Lian's pile of junk caught fire.

After the fire was put out, Xie Lian turned to the Venerable of Empty Words and sighed, his face black with ash. "What a shame! It's all burnt. Not a single scrap left. I didn't even get the chance to experience that lifetime of riches, or any of those other drunken dreams you spoke of. I think the things you say are quite interesting; how about you tell me more?"

Similar incidents occurred again and again, over and over. Toward the end of their time together, Xie Lian would prompt the Venerable of Empty Words for its input before it even spoke. "Do you have anything to say? Do you want to say something?" Finally, the Venerable of Empty Words couldn't take it anymore and fled.

To Venerables of Empty Words, a God of Misfortune like Xie Lian was an extremely unfavorable target. Either he experienced no happy occasions and they waited fruitlessly for years, or he had already grown accustomed to all the bad luck and suffered neither fear nor anxiety. His luck was so bad it defied the imagination of the Venerable of Empty Words, so Xie Lian thought nothing of its curses, and in fact treated them as well-wishes or daydreams.

In any case, after that, Xie Lian never ran into any Venerables of Empty Words. He suspected perhaps that his Venerable of Empty Words fled back to its own kind and griped to them about Xie Lian's general vileness.

Shi Qingxuan listened up to that point and couldn't manage to hold it in; he snorted a laugh.

“Is it very funny?” Hua Cheng asked quietly.

Shi Qingxuan knew it was inappropriate and instantly schooled his expression. “Sorry, Your Highness,” he apologized solemnly.

Xie Lian smiled. “Don’t worry. I think it’s pretty amusing too.” He concluded, “The Venerable of Empty Words draws power from fear in people’s hearts. With this power, it manipulates its victims to realize its predictions and then makes new ones; the cycle continues until the person is thoroughly broken and their mind is lost to despair. The more unsteady one’s heart, the more disadvantageous their position; the more one has, the more one fears loss.”

After a pause, he suggested, “Did one of Lord Wind Master’s devotees request his help after receiving such a curse? You’re the God of Wind, so something like this isn’t within your jurisdiction. If you received such a prayer, you can pass it on to a martial god.”

“It wasn’t a devotee who ran into it,” Shi Qingxuan replied. “It was me.”

Now Xie Lian was even more amazed. “You? Venerables of Empty Words usually don’t dare target heavenly officials. Even if they tried, an esteemed heavenly official such as yourself need not fear them.”

Shi Qingxuan sighed. “If I’d run into it after my ascension, then of course there would be nothing to worry about, but…it’s a long story.”

Many hundreds of years ago, when the Wind and Water Masters were still mortal, they were born and raised in an affluent, prosperous merchant household.

Shi Qingxuan was the second son, and when he was born, the entire family rejoiced. They gave him the baby name “Xuan.” For the sake of building up good luck for the new child, they widely distributed congee and such fare to the hungry and performed acts of compassion. At the time, there was a fortune-teller who, as he ate the congee, saw the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes. He asked for the details of his birth, then said:

“Since I’ve taken a meal from your household, I will tell you this: That son of yours might have a good life, but it’s difficult to explain the whole story. If you want to keep him safe, know that he must be kept low profile. Don’t raise him to be the ostentatious type, don’t give him the chance to shine, and build up an inheritance for him in subtle silence. This will ensure he lives a life of peace. Be sure to never host any celebratory feasts in his name, or you will invite something bad along with them."

Now those were terribly unpleasant words, and very much like something a Venerable of Empty Words would say. The Shi family was a merchant household, and all the qualities the fortune-teller described were especially valuable to them. The fortune-teller was shooed away on the spot with a frown, and his words were naturally dismissed. A few days later, a feast was held in Shi Qingxuan's honor. The lanterns shone and the banners flew; drums thundered and gongs sounded.

At the feast, the guests hollered their congratulations, singing songs of praise to the second young master of the Shi family, wrapped in swaddling clothes.

Then a singsong voice suddenly rang out from the floor.

"WRETCHED BEGINNING, WRETCHED END!"

That voice came from below the ground, but it overtook the voices of everyone present. The crowd was dumbfounded with shock.

The feast ended with apprehension thick in the air. That very night, baby Shi Qingxuan burned with fever, crying and dry-heaving nonstop. The fever wouldn't break no matter what was done, and the entire family was terrified out of their wits. The Shi family remembered that strange fortune-teller who they had kicked out not long ago, and they hastily searched all over to invite him back.

"I told you to keep a low profile, but you didn't listen," the fortune-teller scolded them. "Now that the child has caught the eye of the Reverend, his life will be filled with endless peril. This bout of fever is nothing, and it will subside on its own. But this—it's nothing more than a welcoming gift!"

Of course, he was talking about a Venerable of Empty Words. But this wasn't a typical Venerable of Empty Words that could be chased away so easily—it was most ancient indeed, and strong in cultivation. How strong? Even without joyous occasions, it could still mourn. This was how it came to be called the Reverend of Empty Words.

The sale of a single expensive item can feed a business that is otherwise quiet for years, and the Reverend was the very embodiment of this concept. Its eyes were viciously sharp, and it had a taste for prey of legendary character and earthshaking destiny. Some managed to win against it, but their entire lives were devoted to the fight and their constant struggles provided it with rich meals. Some were utterly destroyed and became its fuel. Having hoarded power for close to a thousand years, its foundation was deep and solid. It had finally awoken after a century's rest and had decided it was time to stretch its legs…and when it next opened its mouth to feed, it was eager to take a large bite.

Shi Qingxuan had just been born and was incidentally exactly to its taste. Thus he was "reserved" by the Reverend—although the tiny baby couldn't understand its predictions even if he heard them, there would come a day when he *could* comprehend, just as there would come a day he knew fear. Once this fear was planted during the boy's childhood, it would burrow deep and become impossible to uproot.

Fortunately, spirits and monsters like these didn't have much in the way of brains, and their way of thinking was bizarre. The fortune-teller plotted out a way to trick it, and the Shi family put the plot into action. They sent Shi Qingxuan away and pretended he'd been given to another family, then dressed their son to look like a female baby before bringing him back. The family then claimed that the female babe was an adopted daughter and raised the little young master as a little young mistress instead. As long as the Reverend of Empty Words could not find the male baby it had reserved, it surely wouldn't be able to remember who it had picked after some time passed.

It was with this plot that Shi Qingxuan matured to ten years of age in peace.

Over those ten years, the once-wealthy merchant household gradually declined. The parents of the two elemental masters passed away, and internal conflicts over inheritance raged. Shi Wudu tired of it all, so the year he turned sixteen, he left home and brought with him the little Shi Qingxuan, who was younger by many years.

The brothers depended on each other to survive. Shi Wudu was the first to enter the mountains to cultivate under a master, and he settled his little brother in a town at the foot of the mountain. Every day, he cultivated and trained until late, not returning home until it was deep into the night.

There was also nothing to eat in the mountains, so he could only take meals at home.

One fateful evening, Shi Wudu was caught up in sparring with another disciple and lost track of time. Shi Qingxuan waited and waited, but still his brother didn't come home. Worried that his brother was surely hungry by now, Shi Qingxuan decided to go up the mountain to deliver food.

Shi Qingxuan was still a child at the time and didn't know how to hike the dark, rugged paths at night. After walking for a long time with the food box, he could no longer ignore the pressing need to relieve himself. Urgently, he pulled up his skirt at the side of the road.

Just then, a figure cloaked in shadow approached from the far end of the mountain road. "Is it Xuan-er up ahead?"

Hearing someone call his baby name, Shi Qingxuan thought his brother had sent someone to find him. He hurriedly dropped his skirt and answered.

"It's me!"

That unfamiliar voice asked, "Were you born in such year, at such month, such day, such time?"

Shi Qingxuan was surprised. Why the sudden request for his birth information? And furthermore, that person had it all correct. So he answered: "That's right! How did you know? Who are you? Do you know my brother?"

That voice didn't respond to his questions. It finally said, "Come here and let me see your face properly."

That sounded like a command. At this point, Shi Qingxuan finally sensed something amiss.

He clutched the food box close to his chest and bolted. As he ran, he heard whirling wild winds behind him, cackling madly. That thing was chasing him, and it was close behind!

It shouted, "YOU'RE GOING TO FALL THIS INSTANT!"

Shi Qingxuan was scared out of his wits, and when it said "fall," he indeed tripped and fell, shattering the food box as he did. Rice spilled all over the ground. Just as the creature was about to pounce, Shi Wudu arrived.

The Reverend of Empty Words vanished from sight when it saw someone had come. Shi Qingxuan's face was filthy with blood and rice from the fall, and Shi Wudu hugged his little brother close. Both of them were terrified and panicked.

It had found him!

Its prey was in its claws after so many years of searching, and the Reverend of Empty Words finally had its first taste of sweetness. From then on, it appeared regularly, each time more calculating than the last. The creature's cultivation was too strong; the Shi family fortune was already depleted, and the cultivators that Shi Wudu managed to hire could do nothing. He lacked the power to throw a million merits to have his voice heard directly by the heavens. Although the creature never demanded Shi Qingxuan's life, the two brothers knew that it was only biding its time, waiting until its prey had been fattened before the butchery. For the time being it was gently slapping his face as a reminder to be afraid, but there would come a day when the slap would truly hurt. It was like a hunter who refused to kill their prey with a single arrow and instead grazed it over and over to thoroughly relish its terror.

This was very much like a death by a thousand cuts.

Fortunately, a turning point finally came. After years of aggressive training, Shi Wudu ascended. The moment he ascended, he immediately brought Shi Qingxuan to the Middle Court and aggressively showered him with rare spiritual treasures and divine riches. A few years later, Shi Qingxuan also successfully ascended. The Reverend of Empty Words thus quieted and disappeared.

Shi Qingxuan very naturally assumed that the creature knew it had been beaten, and had finally given up and backed off. But it seemed he was too optimistic. A few days prior, he was out drinking with a large group of friends, and in the midst of his drunkenness he suddenly heard a ferocious voice in his ear.

"YOU'LL NEVER SEE YOUR BROTHER AGAIN!"

That voice was exceedingly familiar—from the age of ten on, he had heard it at least once or twice every year until he finally ascended. The fear of that voice ran deep in his bones, and it was like thunder crashing in his ear. Shi Qingxuan sobered up instantly. Gripped with terror, he rushed to Pei Ming's domain and only relaxed when he personally saw Shi Wudu alive and well, socializing with Ling Wen and Pei Ming.

He wondered if that voice had simply been his own delusion; after all, the creature had scarred him profoundly when he was young. But he was still worried, so he set out on a mission to find Xie Lian and ask for his assistance, and dragged Ming Yi along for the ride. He hadn't expected to bump into Hua Cheng at Puqi Shrine; when it comes to enemies, the road is truly narrow.

After listening to the story, Xie Lian commented, "So the one Lord Wind Master met and the ones I met are on completely different levels."

Briefly thinking it over, he turned to Hua Cheng. "San Lang, have you ever seen the Reverend of Empty Words?"

Hua Cheng was toying with a pair of chopsticks in his hand. "Hmm? I've never seen it personally, but I know someone who has."

Although Xie Lian was curious as to who this "someone" was, he didn't ask after them. He only said, "How strong is its cultivation, exactly? Is it really that powerful?"

Hua Cheng tossed the chopsticks and replied lazily, "Very strong."

Hearing this, Shi Qingxuan and Ming Yi's expressions grew somber and grave.

"It's not a typical little minion," Hua Cheng added. "Certainly difficult to deal with."

Although he said "difficult to deal with," his expression remained unchanged, like he was only saying it out of courtesy. Regardless, it was not easy to elicit such a comment from Hua Cheng.

"Lord Wind Master, this problem doesn't seem like a trifling matter," Xie Lian said. "Why not tell Lord Water Master?"

Shi Qingxuan waved his hand. "No, no. You have to know, my brother is about to undergo another Heavenly Tribulation. What if he goes off and fights the Reverend of Empty Words only to lose focus? I have to keep this a secret; no one must know. I didn't say a word to anyone, not even to officials who have a good relationship with my brother."

Heavenly officials could undergo multiple Heavenly Tribulations; they weren't necessarily once-in-a-lifetime events. The more Tribulations passed, the greater one's divine rank, the more unshakable one's status, and the stronger one's spiritual power. Shi Wudu had triumphed over two Tribulations already, and Xie Lian had heard in the spiritual communication array's leisurely chatter that he was waiting for the third to occur any day now. It certainly wouldn't be good for him to lose focus—after all, failing to pass a Tribulation meant, in turn, that one's divine rank would plummet.

Chapter 51:
Three Gods, One Ghost, Reverend Nowhere in Sight (Part One)

"I WANT TO TRY and take care of that thing myself," Shi Qingxuan continued sternly. "All things considered, Your Highness has more experience with such entities, so are you free? If not, don't force yourself."

Shi Qingxuan had helped Xie Lian on many occasions in the past, so now that Shi Qingxuan had come to him with an emergency, there was no way Xie Lian could decline and say he had the heart but not the power. But Hua Cheng had come from far away as a guest, and he hadn't been here for more than a few days—if Xie Lian left, who was going to host Hua Cheng? Although it wasn't like Xie Lian himself was a very good host to begin with…

As he considered his options, Hua Cheng smiled and propped his chin on one hand.

"Is gege going to try to catch a glimpse of that Reverend of Empty Words? If it wouldn't be a bother, will you bring me along? It's a rare monster, after all. I've never seen it myself."

Much ashamed, but San Lang understands my predicament, Xie Lian thought to himself.

Filled with gratitude for Hua Cheng's thoughtfulness on the matter, Xie Lian nodded. Shi Qingxuan didn't say anything on the subject. Of course he knew perfectly well that Hua Cheng wasn't coming along to help him, but he at least wasn't coming to cause trouble. In the end, whether Hua Cheng came or not meant nothing to him.

"The Reverend of Empty Words is an elusive creature," Xie Lian warned. "Who knows when or where it will appear again?"

"I couldn't tell you," Shi Qingxuan replied. "If nothing else, I plan on going to the imperial capital and reserving the best room at the best restaurant to drink for around eighty to a hundred days straight. We'll put on plays and set off firecrackers every day, and that will flush it out eventually."

“That’s one way to do it,” Xie Lian acknowledged. “But even if it shows itself, we might not be able to capture it. The best way to win a battle is to know oneself and one’s enemy. Has Lord Wind Master investigated its past prey? How does it hunt? We should see if there’s any pattern.”

“My brother already investigated that, of course.” Shi Qingxuan retrieved a scroll from his sleeve and spread it open. Xie Lian scooted closer to take a look and was in awe in spite of himself.

“Amazing. Amazing.”

Such taste! This creature really only fished for big catches—every name on that scroll was a notable character in the Mortal Realm, and almost all of them had met tragic ends. Moreover, every one of said tragic ends was a suicide following a mental breakdown.

There were those who had slit their throats after their troops met crushing defeat. There were those who made a clean exit with a white bandage noose after their fortunes were ruined overnight. There were those who simply sank into the depths of despair after spending their entire lifetimes seeking influence and affluence only to achieve nothing for their struggle. They weren’t necessarily defeated by the hand of the Reverend of Empty Words; they were overcome by their own fear of loss.

Neither emperors nor kings were on that list; as sons of heaven, true rulers had a protective aura that prevented evil from easily invading their hearts. Generally speaking, those who had the potential to ascend also had natural spiritual shields enveloping their bodies that forced evil to stand down. This made Xie Lian suspect that whatever had attached onto Shi Qingxuan wasn’t something so simple. Perhaps someone behind the scenes was purposely targeting him. If that were the case, that person must be quite formidable. But Shi Qingxuan had been only a baby when he was marked, so how had he attracted such a character?

Just then, Hua Cheng spoke. “Gege, may I take a look?”

Xie Lian passed the scroll to him. “Here.”

Hua Cheng gave it a brief skim. “Who put this scroll together?”

“My brother. What of it?” Shi Qingxuan replied.

Hua Cheng tossed the scroll on the table. “Nothing. Just that it’s full of glaring mistakes. I suggest your brother try again.”

Hearing this, Shi Qingxuan was ready to throw a fit, or perhaps even fists. *“Crimson Rain Sought Flower!”*

Xie Lian held him back and said apologetically, “Lord Wind Master, please sit down. Sit down. Let it go, San Lang always talks like that. He doesn’t mean it.”

“Always like that?” Shi Qingxuan sounded doubtful but sat down.

Xie Lian turned to Hua Cheng. “San Lang, you said it’s full of outrageous mistakes. How so?”

Hua Cheng scooted over to him; they were now sitting much closer than before. Hua Cheng pointed at a few names. “These are wrong.”

Xie Lian looked at the names closely; all of them were known to be lawless, malevolently evil tyrants. “How do you know?”

“Because I killed them,” Hua Cheng said.

“…Doesn’t this say they all died by suicide?” Xie Lian asked.

“I sent messengers to greet them, and they killed themselves before I made any further move,” Hua Cheng explained. “Perhaps that doesn’t count as my kill?”

One couldn’t truly say whether that counted, but at least he was honest. Shi Qingxuan’s lips twitched, and he coughed uncomfortably a few times.

“Can ghosts please not so bluntly describe how they kill people in front of heavenly officials? Can ghosts also please not openly discuss this with other heavenly officials, in front of other heavenly officials?”

Hua Cheng pointed at a few other names. “These are wrong too.”

“And who killed them?” Xie Lian asked.

“Black Water did them in,” Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian was taken aback. “Black Water Demon Xuan? Doesn’t he always lie low?”

"Doesn't mean he doesn't kill," Hua Cheng said. Then he addressed Shi Qingxuan, "That esteemed brother of yours gave you a scroll that's inaccurate and full of errors. There's no heart in this investigation at all; that bundle of rags is nothing but a red herring meant to divert your attention. I suggest you rip it up and get to work researching another one."

Shi Qingxuan snatched back the scroll. "My brother isn't like that!"

Although his retort was weak, his voice was firm. Shi Wudu wouldn't be so careless when it came to his own younger brother, so there could be only one possibility.

"Every profession has its own specialists. Lord Water Master would surely have borrowed another's expertise for this investigation." Xie Lian asked Shi Qingxuan, "May I inquire who actually put the scroll together?"

After some hesitation, Shi Qingxuan replied, "Ling Wen."

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead and stopped speaking. Although other heavenly officials cursed the Palace of Ling Wen for its inefficiency, it still wouldn't be expected to make so many mistakes; this looked like a rough draft turned in to appease a deadline. The Tumors seemed to share a good relationship, at least on the surface. But outsiders would probably never know what lay beneath.

"Let me tell you another way to discern the difference between what's true and what's fake." Hua Cheng leaned back and continued, "Once the Reverend of Empty Words sets its sights on prey, it goes for the roots as well. Not only will its target suffer and die, the families and friends of said target will also be affected. As such, regarding those on this scroll whose own lives were the only casualty in their affair, whose friends and families remain alive and well—those names are wrong."

Shi Qingxuan's face paled for a moment when he heard this, but he quickly regained his cheer and laughed dryly at Ming Yi.

"Ming-xiong, doesn't that mean you're in danger too? You're my best friend, after all!"

Ming Yi shifted to sit farther away from Shi Qingxuan, his expression written with the sentiment that he'd rather not have Shi Qingxuan as a best friend, please and thank you. This move brought him closer to Xie Lian; Hua Cheng's gaze swept over Ming Yi, sharp as a knife.

Seeing that Shi Qingxuan hadn't forgotten to joke around even in times like these, Xie Lian couldn't help but smile. Nevertheless, he could tell Shi Qingxuan was still anxious—rather, it was because of his anxiety that he had to use extra cheer to suppress it.

Shi Qingxuan flashed his Wind Master fan and fluttered it five, six times faster than usual, his black hair flying wildly in the wind.

"Let's go right now! To drink ourselves into oblivion atop the tallest, fanciest tower! I have to see for myself if it'll dare show its face with so many of us around. We've got strength in numbers, ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha…"

"…Lord Wind Master, please calm yourself," Xie Lian urged him. "Wait for me for a moment; I've got a few small things to take care of in the shrine."

Who knew how many days this trip would take? With two children and two mouths—plus a godforsaken ghost possessing a man—he couldn't just leave them be. He considered trying to find someone reliable in the village to watch over them, but it seemed Hua Cheng knew his every worry and spoke up.

"If gege must go, then go without worries. I've got hands to spare; someone will take care of the shrine while you're gone."

Xie Lian breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness for San Lang. It'll be better if there's someone here to watch over things."

Hua Cheng smiled. "Yeah. There needs to be someone watching over things."

"Watching over" obviously meant different things to the both of them, but neither pried deeper. Ming Yi moved the altar table away and began drawing the Teleportation Array on the ground. Shi Qingxuan's fan fluttered so rapidly that its form could barely be made out.

"By the way, Your Highness, I forgot to ask earlier. Who exactly is that outside the door? How did I piss him off to provoke such rude words from his mouth?"

To be asked about only at the end of things, and in such an offhand manner… If Qi Rong overheard, he'd no doubt suffer another attack of heartburn. As Xie Lian busied himself packing up Ruoye and Fangxin, he thought it really was quite impersonable of Shi Qingxuan. On the other hand, Qi Rong hardly counted as a person.

“Didn’t he announce his own title?”

“What, that really is the Green Ghost?” Shi Qingxuan was surprised. “With that face and that attitude? You really do have to see these kinds of things for yourself!”

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead and briefly gave an account of what had transpired these last few days, and upon concluding the tale, reminded Shi Qingxuan to keep it a secret—especially when it came to Lang Qianqiu. While they spoke, Ming Yi finished drawing the Teleportation Array. The one Nan Feng drew last time had been crude and rough, and it had taken him ages to finish. Ming Yi was the complete opposite: his hands were swift and precise, completing the drawing with but a single sweeping motion. The circle he drew was cleaner and more accurate than if one used a compass and ruler, and the characters were so neat and orderly they could have been mistaken for pressed prints. Xie Lian couldn’t help but marvel.

With the array completed, Ming Yi said, “Let’s go.”

Shi Qingxuan sucked in a breath and blew gently to extinguish the candlelight.

Hua Cheng took the lead and was the first to push open the door. The little door creaked open into pitch blackness beyond. The air was thick with mold and dust, as if the door was connected to an old house that had been abandoned for many years.

Following behind Hua Cheng was Xie Lian, who softly thanked Hua Cheng for taking the initiative to open the door as he passed. Then came Shi Qingxuan, and last was Ming Yi. Once he crossed through, he closed the door behind him.

The moment it shut, an ominous voice came from the darkness behind the door.

“The place you wish to go will become the nightmare you never wish to recall!”

The instant Xie Lian heard this, he let loose with a kick. The door instantly collapsed from the impact. It was no longer Puqi Shrine behind the door but rather a pile of trash; once a teleportation array was used, it lost its effect. That intense kick roused thick clouds of dust, and as Xie Lian coughed, he was glad it wasn't the door Hua Cheng had made for him.

With his sleeve covering his face, he asked, "Was that the Reverend of Empty Words?"

Shi Qingxuan tightly gripped his whisk and his Wind Master fan. "That's its voice! Has… Has it been following me?"

Xie Lian waved away the dusty air. "No. There were three heavenly officials and one ghost king in the shrine earlier; if something were following you, how could none of us notice? Clearly it only just arrived."

"Calm down," Ming Yi advised Shi Qingxuan.

"I'm calm!" Shi Qingxuan exclaimed. "I'm very calm. I calmed down a long time ago!"

Hua Cheng stood ahead and said leisurely, "Calm is good, but there's definitely something afoot. Does anyone know where we are?"

Xie Lian looked around and wondered this as well. "Weren't we headed to the nicest restaurant in the imperial capital?"

No matter how he looked at it, this old abandoned house looked nothing like any restaurant Shi Qingxuan had spoken of. The four of them explored the place and found the entrance, but it was closed with massive locks! The matter of the locks was addressed by another kick from Xie Lian, and the door creaked open.

What appeared before them was neither hell nor any such sort of mysterious evil landscape. It was a perfectly ordinary, dull little town.

Hua Cheng arched his brows. "The imperial capital shouldn't look like this."

Xie Lian agreed wholeheartedly—the aura of an imperial capital could not be matched by such a small town. He turned his head.

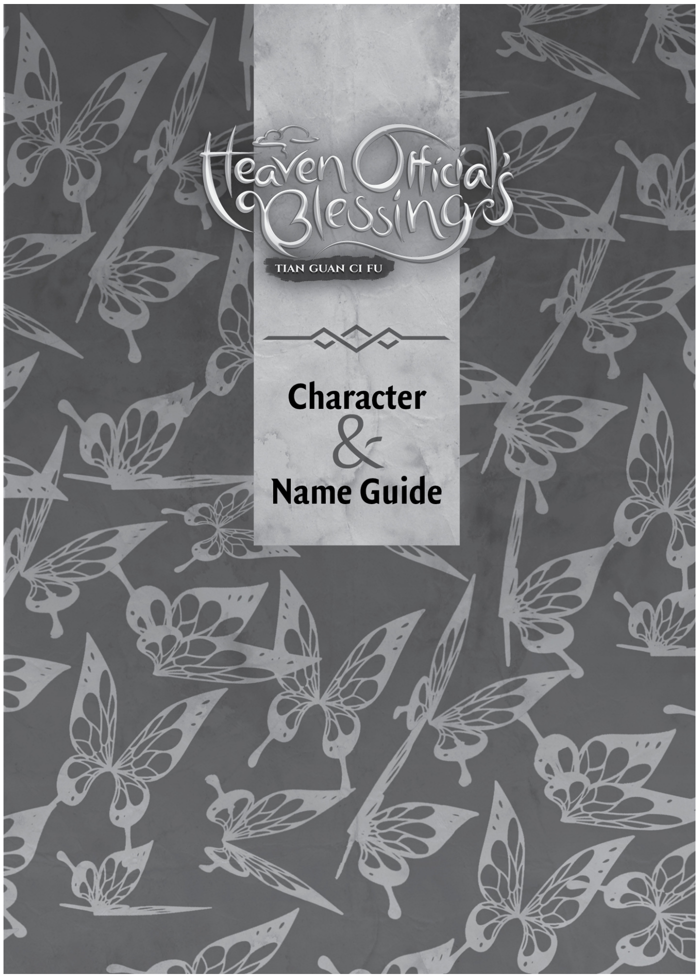
"Lord Earth Master, did you make a mistake in your array?"

“I didn’t make any mistakes,” Ming Yi stated. “This wasn’t our original destination.”

Xie Lian immediately understood.

It meant the creature had meddled—it had sent them here!

THE STORY CONTINUES IN
Heaven Official's Blessing
VOLUME 4



Heaven Official's Blessing

TIAN GUAN CI FU

Character & Name Guide

Characters

The identity of certain characters may be a spoiler; use this guide with caution on your first read of the novel.

Note on the given name translations: Chinese characters may have many different readings. Each reading here is just one out of several possible readings presented for your reference and should not be considered a definitive translation.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Xie Lian

谢怜 "THANK/WILT," "SYMPATHY/LOVE"

Heavenly Title: Xianle, "Heaven's Delight" (仙乐)

Four Famous Tales Title: The Prince Who Pleased God

Once the crown prince of the Kingdom of Xianle and the darling of the Heavens, now a very unlucky twice-fallen god who ekes out a meager living collecting scraps. As his bad luck tends to affect those around him for the worse, Xie Lian has spent his last eight hundred years wandering in solitude. Still, he's accepted his lonely lot in life, or at least seems to have a sense of humor about it. Even for the perpetually unlucky, there's always potential for a chance encounter that can turn eight hundred years of unhappiness around.

Xie Lian has seen and done many things over his very long life and originally ascended as a martial god. While it was his scrap-collecting that saw him ascend for the third time, Xie Lian's feats of physicality are hardly anything to scoff at…though he'd sooner use them as part of a busking performance than to win a fight.

His title Xianle is a multi-layered nickname. "Xianle" is Xie Lian's official heavenly title and also the name of his kingdom. "Xianle" itself can translate to "Heaven's Delight," which ties into Xie Lian's "Four Famous Tales" moniker, "The Prince Who Pleased God." Jun Wu referring to Xie

Lian as “Xianle” sounds professional and businesslike on the surface (as Jun Wu generally refers to gods by their heavenly titles only), but it deliberately and not-so-subtly comes across as an affectionate term of endearment.

Hua Cheng

花城 “FLOWER,” “CITY”

Four Calamities Title: Crimson Rain Sought Flower

The fearsome king of ghosts and terror of the heavens. Dressed in his signature red, he controls vicious swarms of silver butterflies and wields the cursed scimitar known as Eming. His power and wealth are unmatched in the Three Realms, and for this he has as many worshippers as he does enemies (with considerable crossover between categories). He rules over the dazzling and otherworldly Ghost City in the Ghost Realm and is known to drop in to spectate at its infamous Gambler’s Den when he’s in a good mood.

In spite of all this, when it comes to Xie Lian, the Ghost King shows a much kinder and more respectful side of himself. He does not hesitate for a moment to sleep on a single straw mat in Xie Lian’s humble home, nor to get his hands dirty doing household chores at Puqi Shrine. That being said, it’s impossible to deny that as he and Xie Lian grow closer, Hua Cheng seems to be growing more and more mischievous… From the very start, his secret identity as San Lang seemed to be no secret at all to Xie Lian, but Xie Lian still calls him by this name at Hua Cheng’s request.

Honghong-er

红红儿 “RED,” “RED,” FRIENDLY DIMINUTIVE

A young street urchin who Xie Lian saved from certain death long ago, when Xie Lian was a prince in Xianle. Honghong-er is tiny, emaciated, and hardly looks like the ten-year-old child that he is, nor does he act like it. He is constantly on guard and quick to attack, though he strangely seems to become tame—and quite bashful—when Xie Lian is around. He bears immense shame regarding his supposedly ugly appearance and refuses to remove the bandages he wears to cover half his face.

Honghong-er’s life has clearly been one of immense suffering and hardship, and he clings to every one of Xie Lian’s fleeting acts of kindness toward him as if he has never experienced anything like it before.

The name “Honghong-er” is clearly a nickname—it can be roughly translated to “Little Red.”

Young Soldier

A nameless young soldier in the Xianle army. He keeps half of his face hidden beneath bandages at all times and seems determined to stick by Xie Lian’s side in battle to protect him, even if it takes him to the most dangerous parts of the battlefield. His remarkable skill with the sword caught Xie Lian’s attention and made the godprince remember him fondly even during the difficult times leading up to Xianle’s fall.

HEAVENLY OFFICIALS & HEAVENLY ASSOCIATES

Feng Xin

风信 “WIND,” “TRUST/FAITH”

Heavenly Title: Nan Yang, “Southern Sun” (南陽)

The Martial God of the Southeast. He has a short fuse and foul mouth (especially when it comes to his longstanding nemesis, Mu Qing) but is known to be a dutiful, hardworking god. He has a complicated history with Xie Lian: long ago, in their days in the kingdom of Xianle, he used to serve as Xie Lian’s bodyguard and was a close friend until circumstances drove them apart.

Jun Wu

君吾 “LORD,” “I”

Heavenly Title: Shenwu, “Divine Might” (神武)

The Emperor of Heaven and strongest of the gods. He is composed and serene, and it is through his power and wisdom that the Heavens remain aloft—quite literally. Although the Heavens are full of schemers and gossipmongers, Jun Wu stands apart from such petty squabbles and is willing to listen to even the lowliest creatures to hear their pleas for justice. Despite this reputation for fairness, he does have his biases. In further contrast to the rest of the rabble in Heaven, he shows great patience and affection towards Xie Lian to the point that many grumble about favoritism.

Ling Wen

灵文 “INGENIOUS LITERATUS”

Heavenly Title: Ling Wen

The top civil god and also the most overworked. Unlike the majority of gods, she is addressed by her colleagues and most others by her heavenly title. She is one of the rare female civil gods and worked tirelessly (and thanklessly) for many years to earn her position. Ling Wen is exceedingly competent at all things bureaucratic, and her work keeps Heaven's business running (mostly) smoothly. She is the creator and head admin of Heaven's communication array.

These days, her proper name Nangong Jie—"South Palace Hero" (南宫杰)—is only used by her close friend, Pei Ming, though he usually uses the friendly nickname "Noble Jie."

Ming Yi

明仪 "ILLUMINATE/UNDERSTAND," "INSTRUMENT/CEREMONY"

Heavenly Title: Earth Master

The elemental master of earth. Taciturn, sullen, and always looking for a reason to go home—even so, he is often seen out and about with Shi Qingxuan. Shi Qingxuan calls Ming Yi their closest friend and exclusively uses the nickname "Ming-xiong." Ming Yi claims to not enjoy the Wind Master's company.

Mu Qing

慕情 "YEARNING," "AFFECTION"

Heavenly Title: Xuan Zhen, "Enigmatic Truth" (玄真)

The Martial God of the Southwest. He has a short fuse and sharp tongue (especially when it comes to his longstanding nemesis, Feng Xin) and is known for being cold, spiteful, and petty. He has a complicated history with Xie Lian: long ago, in their days in the kingdom of Xianle, he used to serve as Xie Lian's personal servant and was a close friend until circumstances drove them apart.

Pei Ming

裴茗 SURNAME PEI, "TENDER TEA LEAVES"

Heavenly Title: Ming Guang, "Bright Illumination" (明光)

Four Famous Tales Title: The General Who Snapped His Sword

The Martial God of the North. General Pei is a powerful and popular god, and over the years he has gained a reputation as a womanizer. This reputation is deserved: Pei Ming's ex-lovers are innumerable and hail from all the Three Realms. Pei Xiu is Pei Ming's indirect descendant, and Pei Ming has taken him under his wing to help advance his career in the Heavens. And when General Pei sets his sights on a goal, he doesn't take kindly to those who get in his way.

Pei Xiu

裴宿 SURNAME PEI, "CONSTELLATION"

A martial god and a distant (and indirect) descendant of Pei Ming. He's usually called "Little Pei" or "General Pei Junior" for this reason, and his own worship is tied to the worship of Pei Ming himself. He is often called in to clean up his ancestor's messes, but regardless of the circumstances, he always maintains his composure with a polite yet detached air. Always cold and composed, Pei Xiu is a tactician through and through. His ascension to godhood occurred because he led the charge to slaughter the Kingdom of Banyue, and his exile from godhood occurred because of his morally dubious attempts to save his childhood friend Banyue from her fate of eternal punishment.

Quan Yizhen

权一真 "POWER/AUTHORITY," "ONE," "TRUTH/GENUINE"

Heavenly Title: Qi Ying, "Stupendous Hero" (奇英)

The (current) Martial God of the West. It is rumored that there was a previous Martial God of the West that was banished from heaven, leading to Quan Yizhen taking the position. Quan Yizhen appears to have a reputation for beating up his own followers, though this somehow does not damage his popularity in the Mortal Realm.

Rain Master

Heavenly Title: Rain Master

The elemental master of rain who ascended to the heavens shortly before Xie Lian’s first ascension. Rain Master is a reclusive heavenly official who is known to reside on a secluded mountain farm with many subordinates working in the fields. One of those subordinates is an intelligent talking ox who is capable of transforming into human form, one that’s equally as beefy as his bovine build.

Shi Qingxuan

师青玄 “MASTER,” “VERDANT GREEN/BLUE,” “MYSTERIOUS/BLACK”

Heavenly Title: Wind Master

Four Famous Tales Title: The Young Lord Who Poured Wine

The elemental master of wind and younger sibling of the Water Master, Shi Wudu. Shi Qingxuan ascended as a male god, but over the years, he began to be worshipped as a female version of himself. Shi Qingxuan eagerly embraced this, and she leaps at any opportunity to go out on the town in her female form…and will try to drag anyone she’s traveling with into the fun.

Shi Qingxuan is as flighty and pushy as the element they command, and as wealthy as they are generous with their money. They possess a strong sense of justice and will not be dissuaded by notions of propriety. They appear to be close friends with the Earth Master Ming Yi, despite the latter’s insistence to the contrary.

GHOST REALM & GHOST REALM ASSOCIATES

Banyue

半月 “HALF-MOON”

Former state preceptor of the Kingdom of Banyue, now a wrath ghost living in a pot in Puqi Shrine.

Fetus Spirit

A malice-level ghost resembling a monstrous-looking human fetus. It targets pregnant women and seeks to usurp the place of the children in their wombs—killing both mother and unborn child in the process.

Lan Chang

兰菖 “GLADIOLUS”

A prostitute and a malice-level ghost. She is quite pushy when hawking her services and is hardly as delicate as her floral name implies. When it comes to throwing insults around on the streets of Ghost City, she can give as good as she gets. Her name is a play on “changlan,” the Chinese term for the gladiolus flower. In Chinese flower language, the gladiolus means “tryst” (for romantic rendezvous) and also “absence.”

Lang Ying

郎萤 “YOUTH,” “FIREFLY”

A mysterious ghost child afflicted with Human Face Disease. He has known nothing but abuse for hundreds of years due to his horrifying appearance, save for the fleeting kindness and warmth of the human girl Xiao-Ying. The combination of this trauma and his almost total lack of human interaction has left him mostly mute and constantly on high alert. Xie Lian was the one to give him this name: Lang being the national surname of Yong’an, and Ying to commemorate the girl who once took care of him.

Qi Rong

戚容 "FACE OF SORROW" OR "RELATIVE," "TOLERANCE/FACE"

Four Calamities Title: Night-Touring Green Lantern

One of the Four Calamities, also called the "Green Ghost." Unlike the other three Calamities, he's actually only a wrath ghost, not a supreme. Gods and ghosts alike agree that he was only included in the group to bump up the number to an even four. (Also, he's just that big a pest.) He is infamous for his crude behavior and ostentatious attempts to copy the style of the more successful Calamities, as well as for his ravenous appetite for human flesh.

More recently, his crimes have expanded to include kidnapping and body-snatching. In an attempt to hide from heaven's detection, he possessed the body of a human man and in doing so acquired a young son named Guzi.

Qi Rong is Xie Lian's younger cousin on his mother's side, much to Xie Lian's everlasting dismay. Surprising no one, Qi Rong has been a source of stress and trouble ever since their mortal childhoods in Xianle. His royal title in Xianle was Prince Xiao Jing.

Ship-Sinking Black Water

黑水沉舟

Four Calamities Title: Ship-Sinking Black Water

One of the Four Calamities. Ship-Sinking Black Water is a mysterious and reclusive water ghost that rules the South Sea. Like Hua Cheng, he won the bloody gauntlet at Mount Tonglu and wields the power of a supreme ghost.

Waning Moon Officer

下弦月使

Hua Cheng’s right-hand man, subordinate, and all-around errand runner. He bears a cursed shackle on his wrist, which marks him as a banished heavenly official. He is feared and respected in Ghost City, but what kind of face lurks behind that daunting, mysterious mask?

White No-Face

白无相 “WHITE NO-FACE”

Four Calamities Title: White-Clothed Calamity

One of the Four Calamities, White No-Face is mysterious, cruel, and powerful enough to battle with the Heavenly Emperor himself—truly, a supreme among supremes. He destroyed the Kingdom of Xianle with the Human Face Disease pandemic. His peculiar fixation on Xie Lian is unnerving, as are his equally peculiar displays of affection.

MORTAL REALM & MORTAL REALM ASSOCIATES

Guzi

谷子 “MILLET”

A young human child that Qi Rong kidnapped as a byproduct of stealing the body of the boy’s father. Because Qi Rong is possessing Guzi’s father, the poor little boy seems blissfully unaware that he’s in any danger at all, though that hardly prevents him from enduring plenty of suffering at Qi Rong’s hands.

Lang Ying

郎英 “YOUTH,” “HERO”

A Yong’an man that Xie Lian made the acquaintance of in the Xianle era. He is a troubled man who has lost much—some might say everything—to the drought and famine that has struck his home region.

State Preceptors of Xianle

A quartet of cultivators who serve as Xianle’s state preceptors. They are also the religious leaders and head instructors at the Royal Holy Temple, Xianle’s premiere cultivation school and largest place of worship for several gods. They are highly skilled cultivators and specialize in the art of divination, though they are very easily distracted by the allure of a game of cards.

The Chief State Preceptor, Mei Nianqing (**梅念卿** “plum blossom,” “to lecture/to long for,” archaic word for minister/high official) is the most talkative of the bunch and has a close relationship with his most cherished student (and biggest headache), Xie Lian. While the names of the three deputy state preceptors are unknown, Xie Lian clearly respects their skill and wisdom.

The plum blossom in Mei Nianqing’s name is a symbol of endurance in Chinese flower language, as it blooms in the depths of winter. The plum blossom is also one of the four flowers of the *junzi* (the ideal Confucian gentleman).

Xianle Royal Family

The king and queen of the Kingdom of Xianle, and Xie Lian’s parents. Xie Lian’s father is of the ruling Xie (谢 “to thank/to wilt”) clan, and his mother is of the Min (悯 “to feel pity for/commiserate with”) clan. Xie Lian is very close with his mother, who is a doting—if rather naive and sheltered—parent. Xie Lian has a more contentious relationship with his father and frequently squabbles with him.

When Xie Lian’s given name (怜 / lian) and his mother’s clan name (悯 / min) are written together, they form the word “compassion” (怜悯 / lianmin).

SENTIENT WEAPONS AND SPIRITUAL OBJECTS

Eming

厄命 “TERRIBLE/WRETCHED,” “FATE”

Hua Cheng’s sentient scimitar. With a single blood-red eye that peers out from its silver hilt, it is a cursed blade that drinks the blood of its victims and is the bane of the Heavens. It enjoys nothing more than receiving praise and hugs from Xie Lian, and its childish, forward personality is a great embarrassment to its ghostly master.

Fangxin

芳心 “AFFECTIONS OF A YOUNG WOMAN”

An ancient black sword with ties to Xie Lian. An antique, it easily tires when dealing with high-flying heavenly adventures. Xie Lian used the sword’s name as an alias while serving as the state preceptor of Yong’an.

Ruoye

若邪 “LIKE/AS IF,” “EVIL” OR “SWORD”

Xie Lian’s sentient strip of white silk. It is an earnest and energetic sort, if a bit nervous sometimes, and will go to great lengths to protect Xie Lian—quite literally, as it can stretch out to almost limitless dimensions.

Locations

Heavenly Realm

The Heavenly Capital is a divine city built upon the clouds. Amidst flowing streams and auspicious clouds, luxurious palaces dot the landscape, serving as the personal residences and offices of the gods. The Grand Avenue of Divine Might serves as the realm's main thoroughfare, and this road leads directly to the Palace of Divine Might—the Heavenly Emperor's residence where court is held.

The Heavenly Court consists of two sub-courts: the Upper Court and the Middle Court. The Upper Court consists entirely of ascended gods, while the Middle Court consists of officials who—while remarkable and skilled in their own right—have not yet ascended to godhood.

Mortal Realm

The realm of living humans. Often receives visitors from the other two realms.

Kingdom of Xianle

仙乐 "HEAVEN'S DELIGHT" OR "HEAVENLY MUSIC"

A fallen kingdom, once glamorous and famed for its riches and its people's love for the finer things in life—such as art, music, gold, and the finest thing of all, their beloved crown prince, Xie Lian.

Xianle's largest cultivation center, the Royal Holy Temple, sprawled across the peaks of the auspicious Mount Taicang. Its qi-rich landscape nurtured the blanketing forests of fruit trees and flame-red maples. The mountain also hosted the kingdom's largest Palace of Divine Might for worship of the Heavenly Emperor, as well as the kingdom's largest Palace of Xianle for worship of Xie Lian after his ascension. The state preceptors of Xianle presided over the gods' worship and trained cultivators; they resided within the Royal Holy Temple complex at Sixiang Palace.

Unbeknownst to all, save for the Xianle royal family and state preceptors, the Xianle Imperial Mausoleum is located far beneath Mount Taicang.

If one were to peek beneath Xianle's gilded exterior, they would have seen a kingdom that was barely holding itself together. Inside the capital, there was wretched poverty and roaming gangs of street orphans only a few blocks away from the glittering royal palace. Outside the capital, citizens suffered under corrupt regional leaders and were left on their own to survive natural disasters and famine. It would surely take only a little push—and the meddling of a too-young god fueled by good intentions—to make Xianle's palace of gold foils come toppling down.

Kingdom of Yong'an

永安 "ETERNAL PEACE"

A fallen but once-prosperous kingdom. Yong'an began its existence as an impoverished and poor city located within the Kingdom of Xianle. It later became a powder keg of social unrest which kicked off a lengthy and bloody civil war that eventually resulted in Xianle's end.

The Kingdom of Yong'an rose out of the ashes of the Kingdom of Xianle after the latter's collapse, but it very soon fell to the very same corruption and excess that doomed Xianle.

Puqi Village

菩荠村 "WATER CHESTNUT"

A tiny village in the countryside, named for the water chestnuts *(puqi)* that grow in abundance nearby. While small and unsophisticated, its villagers are friendly and welcoming to weary travelers who wish to stay a while. The humble Puqi Shrine—under reconstruction and welcoming donations—can be found here, as well as its resident god, Xie Lian.

Ghost Realm

The Ghost Realm is the home of almost all dead humans, and far less organized and bureaucratic than the Heavenly Realm. Ghosts may leave or be trapped away from the Ghost Realm under some circumstances, which causes major problems for ordinary humans and gods alike.

Ghost City

The largest city in the Ghost Realm, founded and ruled by Hua Cheng. It is a dazzling den of vice, sin, and all things wicked, which makes it the number one spot for visitors from all three realms to shop for nefarious goods and cavort under the glow of the blood-red lanterns.

Hua Cheng is rarely present in the city and does not often make public appearances. On the occasion he is in the mood to do so, he is met with considerable adoration; clearly, Ghost City’s citizens love their Chengzhu and respect him immensely. His residence within the city is the secluded Paradise Manor, which has never seen guests—at least until Xie Lian came to call, of course.

The city is also home to the beautiful, secluded Thousand Lights Temple, which Hua Cheng dedicated to Xie Lian for reasons the man seems reluctant to elaborate on. It serves double-duty as a place of worship and private school of calligraphy, though Xie Lian doesn’t seem to be making much progress on teaching Hua Cheng to write legibly.

Other/Unknown

Mount Tonglu

铜炉山 “COPPER KILN MOUNTAIN”

Mount Tonglu is a volcano and the location of the City of Gu. Every few hundred years, tens of thousands of ghosts descend upon the city for a massive battle royale. Only two ghosts have ever survived the slaughter and made it out—one of those two was Hua Cheng.

Name Guide
Names, Honorifics, & Titles

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

-ER: A word for “son” or “child.” Added to a name, it expresses affection. Similar to calling someone “Little” or “Sonny.”

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

XIAO-: A diminutive meaning “little.” Always a prefix.

Doubling a syllable of a person’s name can be a nickname, and has childish or cutesy connotations.

Family

DIDI: Younger brother or a younger male friend. Casual.

GE: Familiar way to refer to an older brother or older male friend, used by someone substantially younger or of lower status. Can be used alone or with the person’s name.

GEGE: Familiar way to refer to an older brother or an older male friend, used by someone substantially younger or of lower status. Has a cutesier feel than “ge.”

JIEJIE: Familiar way to refer to an older sister or an older female friend, used by someone substantially younger or of lower status. Has a cutesier feel than “jie,” and rarely used by older males.

MEIMEI: Younger sister or an unrelated younger female friend. Casual.

XIONG: Older brother. Generally used as an honorific. Formal, but also used informally between male friends of equal status.

YIFU: Maternal uncle, respectful address.

YIMU: Maternal aunt, respectful address.

Cultivation, Martial Arts, and Immortals

-JUN: A suffix meaning “lord.”

-ZUN: A suffix meaning “esteemed, venerable.” More respectful than “-jun.”

DAOZHANG: A polite address for Daoist cultivators, equivalent to “Mr. Cultivator.” Can be used alone as a title or attached to someone’s family name—for example, one could refer to Xie Lian as “Daozhang” or “Xie Daozhang.”

SHIFU: Teacher/master. For one’s master in one’s own sect. Gender neutral. Mostly interchangeable with Shizun.

SHIXIONG: Older martial brother. For senior male members of one’s own sect.

YUANJUN: Title for high class female Daoist deity. Can be used alone as a title or as a suffix.

ZHENJUN: Title for average male Daoist deity. Can be used alone as a title or as a suffix.

Other

CHENGZHU: A title for the master/ruler of an independent city-state.

GONGZI: Young master of an affluent household.

Pronunciation Guide

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of China. It is a tonal language, so correct pronunciation is vital to being understood! As many readers may not be familiar with the use and sound of tonal marks, below is a very simplified guide on the pronunciation of select character names and terms from MXTX's series to help get you started.

More resources are available at ***sevenseasdanmei.com***

Series Names

SCUM VILLAIN'S SELF-SAVING SYSTEM (RÉN ZHĀ FAˇN PÀI ZÌ JIÙ XÌ TOˇNG):

ren jaa faan pie zzh zioh she tone

GRANDMASTER OF DEMONIC CULTIVATION (MÓ DÀO ZUˇ SHĪ):

mwuh dow zoo shrr

HEAVEN OFFICIAL'S BLESSING (TIĀN GUĀN CÌ FÚ):

tee-yan gwen tsz fuu

Character Names

SHĚN QĪNGQIŪ: Shhen Ching-cheeoh

LUÒ BĪNGHÉ: Loo-uh Bing-huhh

WÈI WÚXIÀN: Way Woo-shee-ahn

LÁN WÀNGJĪ: Lahn Wong-gee

XIÈ LIÁN: Shee-yay Lee-yan

HUĀ CHÉNG: Hoo-wah Cch-yung

XIAˇO-: shee-ow

-ER: ahrr

A-: ah

GŌNGZIˇ: gong-zzh

DÀOZHAˇNG: dow-jon
-JŪN: june
DÌDÌ: dee-dee
GĒGĒ: guh-guh
JIĚJIĚ: gee-ay-gee-ay
MÈIMEI: may-may
-XIÓNG: shong

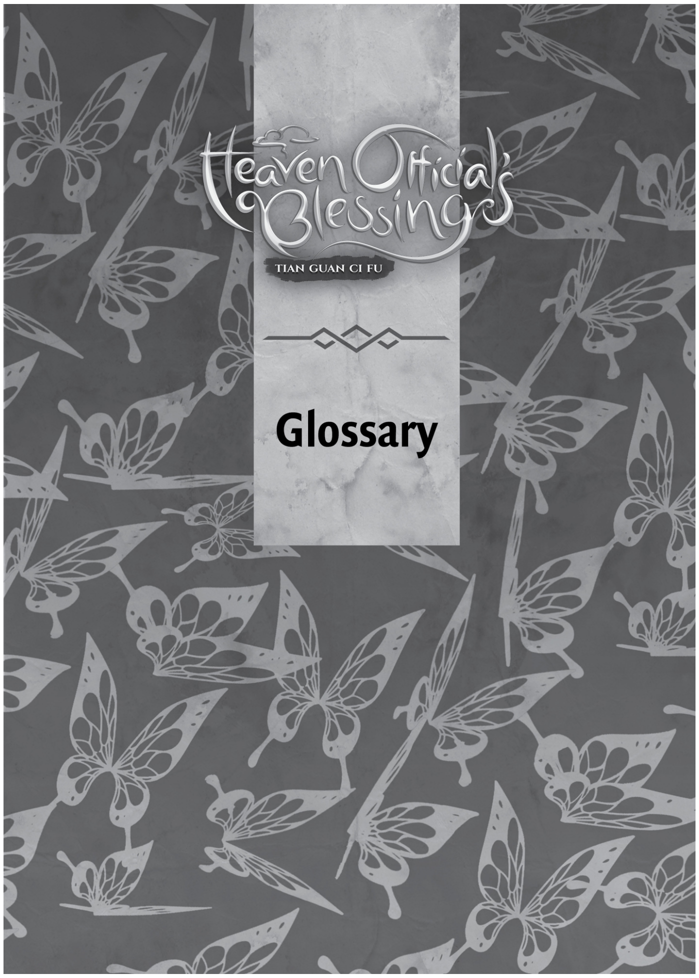
Terms

DĀNMĚI: dann-may
WUˇXIÁ: woo-sheeah
XIĀNXIÁ: sheeyan-sheeah
QÌ: chee

General Consonants & Vowels

X: similar to English sh (**sh**eep)
Q: similar to English ch (**ch**arm)
C: similar to English ts (pan**ts**)
IU: yoh
UO: wuh
ZHI: jrr
CHI: chrr
SHI: shrr
RI: rrr
ZI: zzz
CI: tsz
SI: ssz

U: When u follows a y, j, q, or x, the sound is actually ü, pronounced like eee with your lips rounded like ooo. This applies for yu, yuan, jun, etc.



Heaven Official's Blessing

TIAN GUAN CI FU

Glossary

Glossary

While not required reading, this glossary is intended to offer further context to the many concepts and terms utilized throughout this novel and provide a starting point for learning more about the rich Chinese culture from which these stories were written.

China is home to dozens of cultures, and its history spans thousands of years. The provided definitions are not strictly universal across all these cultural groups, and this simplified overview is meant for new readers unfamiliar with the concepts. This glossary should not be considered a definitive source, especially for more complex ideas.

GENRES

Danmei

Danmei (耽美 / "indulgence in beauty") is a Chinese fiction genre focused on romanticized tales of love and attraction between men. It is analogous to the BL (boys' love) genre in Japanese media. The majority of well-known danmei writers are women writing for women, although all genders produce and enjoy the genre.

Wuxia

Wuxia (武侠 / "martial heroes") is one of the oldest Chinese literary genres and consists of tales of noble heroes fighting evil and injustice. It often follows martial artists, monks, or rogues, who live apart from the ruling government, which is often seen as useless or corrupt. These societal outcasts—both voluntary and not—settle disputes among themselves, adhering to their own moral codes over the governing law.

Characters in wuxia focus primarily on human concerns, such as political strife between factions and advancing their own personal sense of justice. True wuxia is low on magical or supernatural elements. To Western moviegoers, a well-known example is *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

Xianxia

Xianxia (仙侠 / “immortal heroes”) is a genre related to wuxia that places more emphasis on the supernatural. Its characters often strive to become stronger, with the end goal of extending their life span or achieving immortality.

Xianxia heavily features Daoist themes, while cultivation and the pursuit of immortality are both genre requirements. If these are not the story’s central focus, it is not xianxia. *The Scum Villain’s Self-Saving System*, *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, and *Heaven Official’s Blessing* are all considered part of both the danmei and xianxia genres.

Webnovels

Webnovels are novels serialized by chapter online, and the websites that host them are considered spaces for indie and amateur writers. Many novels, dramas, comics, and animated shows produced in China are based on popular webnovels.

Heaven Official's Blessing was first serialized on the website *JJWXC*.

TERMINOLOGY

ARRAY: Area-of-effect magic circles. Anyone within the array falls under the effect of the array's associated spell(s).

ASCENSION: In typical xianxia tales, gods are conceived naturally and born divine. Immortals cannot attain godhood but can achieve great longevity. In *Heaven Official's Blessing*, however, both gods and immortals were born mortal and either cultivated deeply or committed great deeds and attained godhood after transcending the Heavenly Tribulation. Their bodies shed the troubles of a mortal form and are removed from the corporeal world.

AUSPICIOUS CLOUDS: A sign of good fortune and the divine, auspicious clouds are also often seen as methods of transport for gods and immortals in myth. The idea springs from the obvious association with clouds and the sky/heavens, and also because yun (云 / "cloud") and yun (运 / "luck") sound similar.

BOWING: Bowing is a social custom in many Asian nations. There are several varieties of bow in Chinese culture, which are distinguished by how low the bow goes as well as any associated hand gestures. A deeper bow indicates more respect, and those with high social status will always expect a deeper bow from those with low status. The kowtow (see associated glossary entry) is the most respectful level of bow. "Standing down in a bow" means holding a bowing position while leaving someone's presence.

BUDAOWENG: A budaoweng (不倒翁, "wobbly old man") is an oblong doll, weighted so that it rolls back into an upright position whenever it is knocked down.

CHINESE CALENDAR: The Chinese calendar uses the *Tian Gan Di Zhi* (Heavenly Stems, Earthly Branches) system, rather than numbers, to mark the years. There are ten heavenly stems (original meanings lost) and twelve earthly branches (associated with the zodiac), each represented by a written character. Each stem and branch is associated with either yin or yang, and one of the elemental properties: wood, earth, fire, metal, and water. The stems and branches are combined in cyclical patterns to create a calendar where every unit of time is associated with certain attributes.

This is what a character is asking for when inquiring for the date/time of birth (生辰八字 / "eight characters of birth date/time"). Analyzing the stem/branch characters and their elemental associations was considered essential information in divination, fortune-telling, matchmaking, and even business deals.

Colors:

WHITE: Death, mourning, purity. Used in funerals for both the deceased and mourners.

BLACK: Represents the Heavens and the Dao.

RED: Happiness, good luck. Used for weddings.

YELLOW/GOLD: Wealth, prosperity. Often reserved for the emperor.

BLUE/GREEN (CYAN): Health, prosperity, and harmony.

PURPLE: Divinity and immortality, often associated with nobility.

CONFUCIANISM: Confucianism is a philosophy based on the teachings of Confucius. Its influence on all aspects of Chinese culture is incalculable. Confucius placed heavy importance on respect for one's elders and family, a concept broadly known as *xiao* (孝 / "filial piety"). The family structure is used in other contexts to urge similar behaviors, such as respect of a student towards a teacher, or people of a country towards their ruler.

COUGHING/SPITTING BLOOD: A way to show a character is ill, injured, or upset. Despite the very physical nature of the response, it does not necessarily mean that a character has been wounded; their body could simply be reacting to a very strong emotion.

(See also Seven Apertures/Qiqiao.)

CULTIVATORS/CULTIVATION: Cultivators are practitioners of spirituality and martial arts who seek to gain understanding of the will of the universe while attaining personal strength and extending their life span Cultivation is a long process marked by "stages." There are traditionally nine stages, but this is often simplified in fiction. Some common stages are noted below, though exact definitions of each stage may depend on the setting.

- Qi Condensation/Qi Refining (凝气/练气)
- Foundation Establishment (筑基)
- Core Formation/Golden Core (结丹/金丹)
- Nascent Soul (元婴)
- Deity Transformation (化神)
- Great Ascension (大乘)
- Heavenly Tribulation (渡劫)

CULTIVATION MANUAL: Cultivation manuals and sutras are common plot devices in xianxia/wuxia novels. They provide detailed instructions on a secret or advanced training technique and are sought out by those who wish to advance their cultivation levels.

CURRENCY: The currency system during most dynasties was based on the exchange of silver and gold coinage. Weight was also used to measure denominations of money. An example is something being marked with a price of "one liang of silver."

DAOISM: Daoism is the philosophy of the *dao* (道), known as "the way." Following the dao involves coming into harmony with the natural order of the universe, which makes someone a “true human,” safe from external harm and who can affect the world without intentional action. Cultivation is a concept based on Daoist superstitions.

DEMONS: A race of immensely powerful and innately supernatural beings. They are almost always aligned with evil.

DISCIPLES: Cultivation sect members are known as disciples. Disciples live on sect grounds and have a strict hierarchy based on skill and seniority. They are divided into Core, Inner, and Outer rankings, with Core being the highest. Higher-ranked disciples get better lodging and other resources.

When formally joining a sect as a disciple or a student, the sect becomes like the disciple’s new family: teachers are parents and peers are siblings. Because of this, a betrayal or abandonment of one’s sect is considered a deep transgression of Confucian values of filial piety. This is also the origin of many of the honorifics and titles used for martial arts.

DRAGON: Great chimeric beasts who wield power over the weather. Chinese dragons differ from their Western counterparts as they are often benevolent, bestowing blessings and granting luck. They are associated with the Heavens, the Emperor, and yang energy.

EIGHT TRIGRAMS MAP: Also known as the bagua or pakua, an eight trigrams map is a Daoist diagram containing eight symbols that represent the fundamentals of reality, including the five elements. They often feature a symbol for yin and yang in the center as a representation of perfect balance between opposing forces.

ENTRANCE COUPLETS: Written poetry verses that are posted outside the door of a building. The two lines of poetry on the sides of the door express the meaning/theme of the establishment, or are a wish for good luck. The horizontal verse on the top summarizes or is the subject of the couplets.

FACE: *Mianzi* (面子), generally translated as “face”, is an important concept in Chinese society. It is a metaphor for a person’s reputation and can be extended to further descriptive metaphors. For example, “having face” refers to having a good reputation, and “losing face” refers to having one’s reputation hurt. Meanwhile, “giving face” means deferring to someone else to help improve their reputation, while “not wanting face” implies that a person is acting so poorly/shamelessly that they clearly don’t care about their reputation at all. “Thin face” refers to someone easily embarrassed or prone to offense at perceived slights. Conversely, “thick face” refers to someone not easily embarrassed and immune to insults.

FENG SHUI: Literally translates to wind-water. Refers to the natural laws believed to govern the flow of qi in the arrangement of the natural environment and man-made structures. Favorable feng shui and good qi flow have various beneficial effects to everyday life and the practice of cultivation, while the opposite is true for unfavorable feng shui and bad qi flow.

THE FIVE ELEMENTS: Also known as the *wuxing* (五行 / “Five Phases”). Rather than Western concepts of elemental magic, Chinese phases are more commonly used to describe the interactions and relationships between things. The phases can both beget and overcome each other.

- Wood (木 / mu)
- Fire (火 / huo)
- Earth (土 / tu)
- Metal (金 / jin)
- Water (水 / shui)

Flowers:

LOTUS: Associated with Buddhism. It rises untainted from the muddy waters it grows in, and thus symbolizes ultimate purity of the heart and mind.

PINE (TREE): A symbol of evergreen sentiment / everlasting affection.

PLUM (BLOSSOMING TREE): A symbol of endurance, as it blooms in the depths of winter. The plum blossom is also one of the four flowers of the ideal Confucian gentleman.

WILLOW (TREE): A symbol of lasting affection and friendship. Also is a symbol of farewell and can mean “urging someone to stay.” “Meeting under the willows” can connote a rendezvous.

FUNERALS: Daoist or Buddhist funerals generally last for forty-nine days. It is a common belief that souls of the dead return home on the night of the sixth day after their death. There are different rituals depending on the region regarding what is done when the spirit returns, but generally they are all intended to guide the spirit safely back to the family home without getting lost; these rituals are generally referred to by the umbrella term “Calling the Spirit on the Seventh Day.”

During the funeral ceremony, mourners can present the deceased with offerings of food, incense, and joss paper. If deceased ancestors have no patrilineal descendants to give them offerings, they may starve in the afterlife and become hungry ghosts. Wiping out a whole family is punishment for more than just the living.

After the funeral, the coffin is nailed shut and sealed with paper talismans to protect the body from evil spirits. The deceased is transported in a procession to their final resting place, often accompanied by loud music to scare off evil spirits. Cemeteries are usually on hillsides; the higher a grave is located, the better the feng shui. The traditional mourning color is white.

GHOST: Ghosts (鬼) are the restless spirits of deceased sentient creatures. Ghosts produce yin energy and crave yang energy. They come in a variety of types: they can be malevolent or helpful, can retain their former personalities or be fully mindless, and can actively try to interact with the living world to achieve a goal or be little more than a remnant shadow of their former lives.

GU SORCERY: The concept of gu (蛊 / “poison”) is common in wuxia and xianxia stories. In more realistic settings, it may refer to crafting poisons that are extracted from venomous insects and creatures. Things like snakes, toads, and bugs are generally associated with the idea of gu, but it can also apply to monsters, demons, and ghosts. The effects of gu poison are bewitchment and manipulation. “Swayed by gu” has become a common phrase meaning “lost your mind/been led astray” in modern Chinese vocabulary.

HAND GESTURES: The baoquan (抱拳 / “hold fist”) is a martial arts salute where one places their closed right fist against their open left palm. The gongshou (拱手 / “arch hand”) is a more generic salute not specific to martial artists, where one drapes their open left palm over their closed right fist. The orientation of both of these salutes is reversed for women. During funerals, the closed hand in both salutes switches, where men will use their left fist and women their right.

HAND SEALS: Refers to various hand and finger gestures used by cultivators to cast spells, or used while meditating. A cultivator may be able to control their sword remotely with a hand seal.

HEAVENLY REALM: An imperial court of enlightened beings. Some hold administrative roles, while others watch over and protect a specific aspect of the celestial and mortal realm, such as love, marriage, a piece of land, etc. There are also carefree immortals who simply wander the world and help mortals as they go, or become hermits deep in the mountains.

HEAVENLY TRIBULATION: Before a Daoist cultivator can ascend to the heavens, they must go through a trial known as a Heavenly Tribulation. In stories where the Heavens are depicted with a more traditional nine-level structure, even gods themselves must endure and overcome tribulations if they want to level up. The nature of these trials vary, but the most common version involves navigating a powerful lightning storm. To fail means losing one's attained divine stage and cultivation.

HONGBAO: A monetary gift given during holidays or special occasions, such as weddings, graduations, the birth of a child, etc. The money is given inside a red envelope, the color of which symbolizes good luck. In some regions, only married couples are expected to give out money.

HUALIAN: Shortened name for the relationship between Hua Cheng and Xie Lian.

IMMORTALS AND IMMORTALITY: Immortals have transcended mortality through cultivation. They possess long lives, are immune to illness and aging, and have various magical powers. An immortal can progress to godhood if they pass a Heavenly Tribulation. The exact life span of immortals differs from story to story, and in some they only live for three or four hundred years.

IMMORTAL-BINDING ROPES: Ropes, nets, and other restraints enchanted to withstand the power of an immortal or god. They can only be cut by high-powered spiritual items or weapons and usually limit the abilities of those trapped by them.

INCENSE TIME: A common way to tell time in ancient China, referring to how long it takes for a single incense stick to burn. Standardized incense sticks were manufactured and calibrated for specific time measurements: a half hour, an hour, a day, etc. These were available to people of all social classes.

In *Heaven Official's Blessing*, the incense sticks being referenced are the small sticks one offers when praying at a shrine, so "one incense time" is roughly thirty minutes.

INEDIA: A common ability that allows an immortal to survive without mortal food or sleep by sustaining themselves on purer forms of energy based on Daoist fasting. Depending on the setting, immortals who have achieved inedia may be unable to tolerate mortal food, or they may be able to choose to eat when desired.

JADE: Jade is a culturally and spiritually important mineral in China. Its durability, beauty, and the ease with which it can be utilized for crafting both decorative and functional pieces alike has made it widely beloved since ancient times. The word might cause Westerners to think of green jade (the mineral jadeite), but Chinese texts are often referring to white jade (the mineral nephrite). This is the color referenced when a person's skin is described as "the color of jade." Other colors of jade will usually be specified in the text.

JADE EMPEROR: In Daoist cosmology, the Jade Emperor (玉皇大帝) is the emperor of heaven, the chief of the heavenly court, and one of the highest ranked gods in the heavenly realm, lower only to the three primordial emanations. When one says "Oh god/lord" or "My heavens", it is usually referring to the Jade Emperor. In *Heaven Official's Blessing*, Jun Wu's role replaces that of the Jade Emperor.

JOSS PAPER: Also referred to as ghost paper, joss paper is a form of paper crafting used to make offerings to the deceased. The paper can be folded into various shapes and is burned as an offering, allowing the deceased person to utilize the gift the paper represents in the realm of the dead. Common gifts include paper money, houses, clothing, toiletries, and dolls to act as the deceased's servants.

KOWTOW: The *kowtow* (叩头 / “knock head”) is an act of prostration where one kneels and bows low enough that their forehead touches the ground. A show of deep respect and reverence that can also be used to beg, plead, or show sincerity.

MERIDIANS: The means by which qi travels through the body, like a magical bloodstream. Medical and combat techniques that focus on redirecting, manipulating, or halting qi circulation focus on targeting the meridians at specific points on the body, known as acupoints. Techniques that can manipulate or block qi prevent a cultivator from using magical techniques until the qi block is lifted.

MID-AUTUMN FESTIVAL: Zhongqiu Jie (中秋節), or the Mid-Autumn Festival, falls on the fifteenth day of the eighth month of the Lunar Calendar. It typically falls around September-October on the Western Calendar. This festival is heavily associated with reunions, both family and otherwise. Mooncakes—also known as reunion cakes, as they are meant to be shared—are a popular food item associated with this festival. Much like the Shangyuan Festival, the Mid-Autumn Festival involves the lighting of lanterns to worship the heavens. It is also commonly associated with courtship and matchmaking.

Numbers

TWO: Two (二 / “er”) is considered a good number and is referenced in the common idiom “good things come in pairs.” It is common practice to repeat characters in pairs for added effect.

THREE: Three (三 / “san”) sounds like *sheng* (生 / “living”) and also like *san* (散 / “separation”).

FOUR: Four (四 / “si”) sounds like *si* (死 / “death”). A very unlucky number.

SEVEN: Seven (七 / “qi”) sounds like *qi* (齊 / “together”), making it a good number for love-related things. However, it also sounds like *qi* (欺 /

“deception”).

EIGHT: Eight (八 / “ba”) sounds like *fa* (發 / “prosperity”), causing it to be considered a very lucky number.

NINE: Nine (九 / “jiu”) is associated with matters surrounding the Emperor and Heaven, and is as such considered an auspicious number.

MXTX’s work has subtle numerical theming around its love interests. In *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, her second book, Lan Wangji is frequently called Lan-er-gege (“second brother Lan”) as a nickname by Wei Wuxian. In her third book, *Heaven Official’s Blessing*, Hua Cheng is the third son of his family and gives the name San Lang (“third youth”) when Xie Lian asks what to call him.

PHOENIX: *Fenghuang* (凤凰 / “phoenix”), a legendary chimeric bird said to only appear in times of peace and to flee when a ruler is corrupt. They are heavily associated with femininity, the Empress, and happy marriages.

PILLS AND ELIXIRS: Magic medicines that can heal wounds, improve cultivation, extend life, etc. In Chinese culture, these things are usually delivered in pill form. These pills are created in special kilns.

PLAGUES AND DISEASE: In ancient China, plagues and pandemics were considered to be the work of demons or other evil creatures, and were thought to be karmic punishment from the heavens for humanity’s evil deeds. It was thought that the gods would protect the righteous and innocent from catching the disease, and mass repentance was the only way to “cure” or banish a plague for good. When the gods determined the punishment served to be sufficient, they would descend and drive out the plague-causing demons.

This outlook is why Human Face Disease is considered in-universe to be a mark against the Kingdom of Xianle’s morality and a mark against Xie Lian as both a leader and a god—the plague only affecting Xianle is “proof” that they angered the heavens, and Xie Lian being unable to cure it by his own power is “proof” that he does not have heaven’s blessing and is not a true god.

PRIMORDIAL SPIRIT: The essence of one’s existence beyond the physical. The body perishes, the soul enters the karmic wheel, but the spirit that makes one unique is eternal.

QI: *Qi* (气) is the energy in all living things. There is both righteous qi and evil or poisonous qi.

Cultivators strive to cultivate qi by absorbing it from the natural world and refining it within themselves to improve their cultivation base. A cultivation base refers to the amount of qi a cultivator possesses or is able to possess. In xianxia, natural locations such as caves, mountains, or other secluded places with lush wildlife are often rich in qi, and practicing there can allow a cultivator to make rapid progress in their cultivation.

Cultivators and other qi manipulators can utilize their life force in a variety of ways, including imbuing objects with it to transform them into lethal weapons or sending out blasts of energy to do powerful damage. Cultivators also refine their senses beyond normal human levels. For instance, they may cast out their spiritual sense to gain total awareness of everything in a region around them or to feel for potential danger.

QI CIRCULATION: The metabolic cycle of qi in the body, where it flows from the dantian to the meridians and back. This cycle purifies and refines qi, and good circulation is essential to cultivation. In xianxia, qi can be transferred from one person to another through physical contact and can heal someone who is wounded if the donor is trained in the art.

QIANKUN: *Qiankun* can be translated to “universe.” Qiankun pouches (乾坤袋) or Qiankun sleeves (乾坤袖) are containers that are bigger on the inside, used to easily carry cargo a person normally couldn’t manage. Qiankun items are common in fantasy settings.

RED STRING OF FATE: Refers to the myth in many East Asian cultures that an invisible red string connects two individuals who are fated to be lovers. The string is tied at each lover's finger (usually the middle finger or pinky finger).

SECT: A cultivation sect is an organization of individuals united by their dedication to the practice of a particular method of cultivation or martial arts. A sect may have a signature style. Sects are led by a single leader, who is supported by senior sect members. They are not necessarily related by blood.

SEVEN APERTURES/QIQIAO: (七窍) The seven facial apertures: the two eyes, nose, mouth, tongue, and two ears. The essential qi of vital organs are said to connect to the seven apertures, and illness in the vital organs may cause symptoms there. People who are ill or seriously injured may be "bleeding from the seven apertures."

SHANGYUAN: Shangyuan Jie (上元節), or the Lantern Festival, marks the fifteenth and last day of the Lunar New Year (usually around February on the Solar Calendar). It is a day for worshipping and celebrating the celestial heavens by hanging lanterns, solving riddles, and performing Dragon Dances. Glutinous rice ball treats known as yuanxiao and tangyuan are highlights of this festival, so much so that the festival's alternate name is Yuanxiao Jie (元宵節).

SHRINES: Shrines are sites at which an individual can pray or make offerings to a god, spirit, or ancestor. They contain an object of worship to focus on such as a statue, a painting or mural, a relic, or a memorial tablet in the case of an ancestral shrine. The term also refers to small roadside shrines or personal shrines to deceased family members or loved ones kept on a mantle. Offerings like incense, food, and money can be left at a shrine as a show of respect.

SPIRIT BANNER: A banner or flag intended to guide spirits. Can be hung from a building or tree to mark a location or carried around on a staff.

STATE PRECEPTOR: State preceptors, or guoshi, are high-ranking government officials who also have significant religious duties. They serve as religious heads of state under the emperor and act as the tutors, chaplains, and confidants of the emperor and his direct heirs.

SWORDS: A cultivator's sword is an important part of their cultivation practice. In many instances, swords are spiritually bound to their owner and may have been bestowed to them by their master, a family member, or obtained through a ritual. Cultivators in fiction are able to use their swords as transportation by standing atop the flat of the blade and riding it as it flies through the air. Skilled cultivators can summon their swords to fly into their hand, command the sword to fight on its own, or release energy attacks from the edge of the blade.

SWORD GLARE: Jianguang (剑光 / "sword light"), an energy attack released from a sword's edge.

SWORN BROTHERS/SISTERS/FAMILIES: In China, sworn brother-hood describes a binding social pact made by two or more unrelated individuals. Such a pact can be entered into for social, political, and/or personal reasons. It was most common among men but was not unheard of among women or between people of different genders.

The participants treat members of each other's families as their own and assist them in the ways an extended family would: providing mutual support and aid, support in political alliances, etc. Sworn siblings will refer to themselves as brother or sister, but this is not to be confused with familial relations like blood siblings or adoption. It is sometimes used in Chinese media, particularly danmei, to imply romantic relationships that could otherwise be prone to censorship.

TALISMANS: Strips of paper with spells written on them, often with cinnabar ink or blood. They can serve as seals or be used as one-time spells.

THE THREE REALMS: Traditionally, the universe is divided into Three Realms: the **Heavenly Realm**, the **Mortal Realm**, and the **Ghost Realm**. The Heavenly Realm refers to the Heavens and Celestial Court, where gods reside and rule, the Mortal Realm refers to the human world, and the Ghost Realm refers to the realm of the dead.

VINEGAR: To say someone is drinking vinegar or tasting vinegar means they're having jealous or bitter feelings. Generally used for a love interest growing jealous while watching the main character receive the attention of a rival suitor.

WEDDING TRADITIONS: Red is an important part of traditional Chinese weddings, as the color of prosperity, happiness, and good luck. It remains the standard color for bridal and bridegroom robes and wedding decorations even today. During the ceremony, the couple each cut off a lock of their own hair, then intertwine and tie the two locks together to symbolize their commitment.

WHISK: A whisk held by a cultivator is not a baking tool but a Daoist symbol and martial arts weapon. Usually made of horsehair bound to a wooden stick, the whisk is based off a tool used to brush away flies without killing them and is symbolically meant for wandering Daoist monks to brush away thoughts that would lure them back to secular life. Wudang Daoist Monks created a fighting style based on wielding it as a weapon.

YAO: Animals, plants, or objects that have gained spiritual consciousness due to prolonged absorption of qi. Especially high-level or long-lived yao are able to take on a human form. This concept is comparable to Japanese yokai, which is a loanword from the Chinese yao.

Yao are not evil by nature but often come into conflict with humans for various reasons, one being that the cores they develop can be harvested by human cultivators to increase their own abilities.

YIN ENERGY AND YANG ENERGY: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy that describes the complementary interdependence of opposite/contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and differences. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy can do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish themselves of whichever they lack.

ZHONGYUAN: Zhongyuan Jie (中元節), or the Ghost Festival / Hungry Ghost Festival, falls on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of the Lunar Calendar (this usually falls around August/September on the Solar Calendar). The festival celebrates the underworld, and offerings are made to the dead to appease their spirits and help them move on.

Footnotes

1. “High score” refers to the imperial state exam—high scorers would be placed in various government positions. When praying to a deity for something, it was folk custom to vow to do something if your desire was granted, usually to make a donation.

2. Retreating without turning and showing one’s back is a sign of respect.

3. A cangue is a flat board, usually made of wood, that was secured around the neck and sometimes hands of people as a form of corporal punishment or public humiliation.

4. A reference to a verse from Lu You’s “Ode to the Plum Blossom”: “Her petals may be ground in the mud, but her fragrance will endure.” This verse was also referenced during the earlier sequence at the Shangyuan Heavenly Ceremonial Procession, and here it serves as an ironic echo.

5. Verses from Tang Dynasty poet Li Bai’s longest autobiographical poem.

6. [狐假虎威] “The fox assuming the power of the tiger” is an expression describing a weak individual who appears strong only because they’re accompanied by someone powerful.

7. Addressing another by a title older than one’s own generation is meant as a form of respect, since one is lowering one’s own status.

8. [紅袖添香] “Fragrance Added by Red Sleeves” is a verse from a Song Dynasty poem depicting the arrival of an elegant beauty while the scholar studies through the night. The “fragrance” refers to incense, and “red sleeves” to the beauty. The art of incense is delicate and time-consuming, so this paints an ambience that is warm, sweet, and long-lasting.

9. “Ache of Separation”

After seeing the vast sea, no water can compare;
Scattered from the peak of Mount Wu, there are no other clouds;
Many times I’ve passed through the flowers, yet I spare them no glance;
For half my fate is in cultivation, and the other half, in you.

Written by the Tang poet Yuan Zhen, this poem expresses his eternal love and devotion to his dead wife. Mount Wu is a mythical place, and its usage in this piece alludes to an idiom, “the colorful clouds surrounding Mount Wu,” which means “rendezvous of lovers.”

10. [豔貞] “Yanzhen” translates to “Glamorous Virtue.”

11. The River Snail Girl is a character from Chinese folklore. Once upon a time a farmer found a giant river snail in the fields he worked. He took it home and kept it in his house. When he was out during the day, the river snail would transform into a woman and perform domestic duties such as cleaning and cooking. Once he found out her true nature, they fell in love and lived happily ever after.

About the Author

“A young superstitious girl,

renowned poster of memes;

a gourmet world goof, who takes photos with shaky hands;

and types cursedly slow, finishing stories depending on the mood.

...All lies.

I actually enjoy a refreshing cup of tea in the afternoon, staring into the far-off distance as I open my beloved notebook to write poetry.

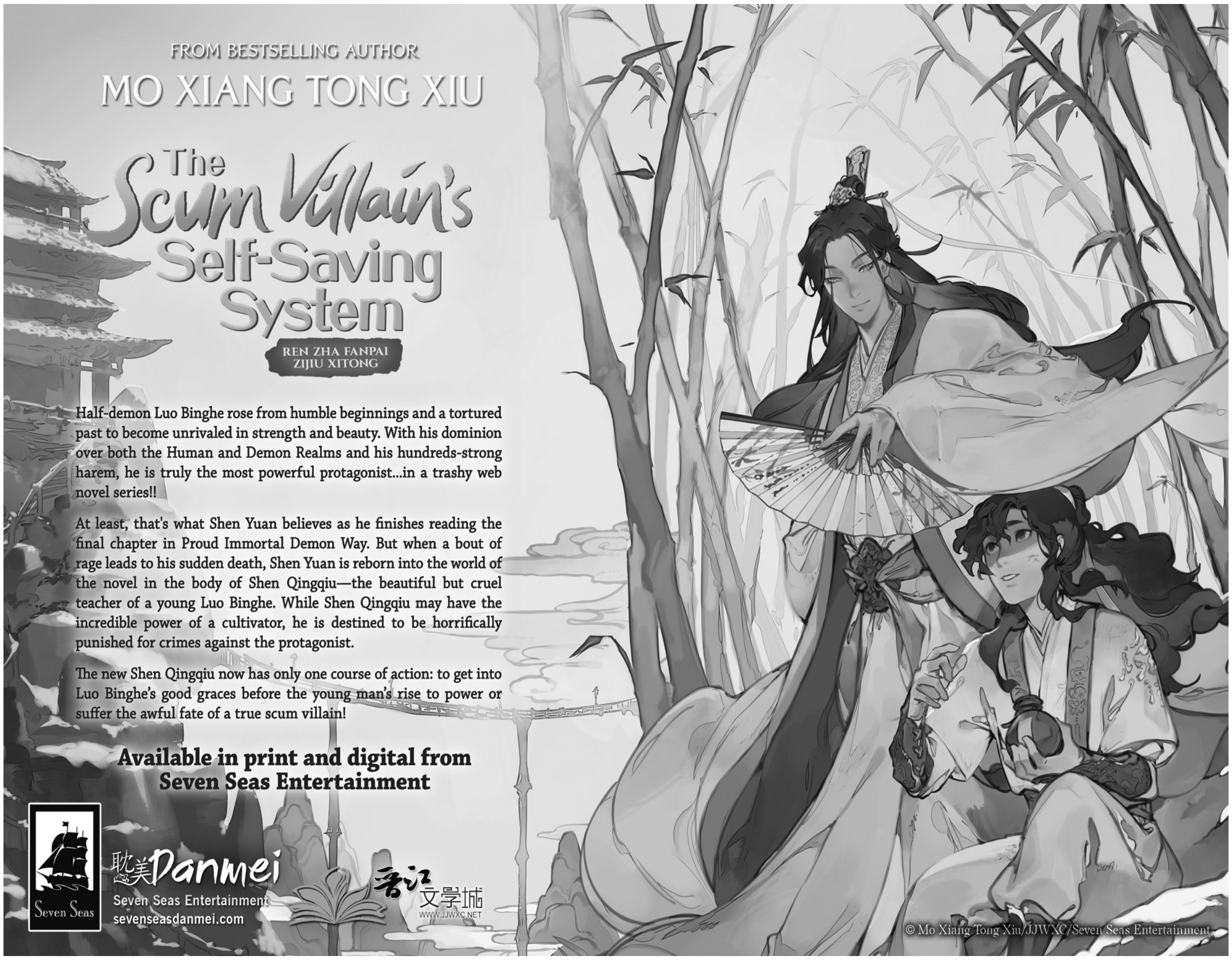
...No, no, no, that’s even more of a lie.

All right, actually, I'm just someone

who writes.

Yep.”

Mo Xiang Tong Xiu (MXTX) is a globally renowned author whose works are often cited as the best-known in the modern danmei genre. Originally self-published via the novel serialization website, JJWXC, her current titles include *The Scum Villain’s Self-Saving System, Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, and *Heaven Official’s Blessing.* All three series have received multiple adaptations and have been published in numerous languages around the world.



FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MO XIANG TONG XIU

The Scum Villain's Self-Saving System
REN ZHA FANPAI ZIJIU XITONG

Half-demon Luo Binghe rose from humble beginnings and a tortured past to become unrivaled in strength and beauty. With his dominion over both the Human and Demon Realms and his hundreds-strong harem, he is truly the most powerful protagonist...in a trashy web novel series!!

At least, that's what Shen Yuan believes as he finishes reading the final chapter in Proud Immortal Demon Way. But when a bout of rage leads to his sudden death, Shen Yuan is reborn into the world of the novel in the body of Shen Qingqiu—the beautiful but cruel teacher of a young Luo Binghe. While Shen Qingqiu may have the incredible power of a cultivator, he is destined to be horrifically punished for crimes against the protagonist.

The new Shen Qingqiu now has only one course of action: to get into Luo Binghe's good graces before the young man's rise to power or suffer the awful fate of a true scum villain!

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FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MO XIANG TONG XIU

Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation

MO DAO ZU SHI

Wei Wuxian was once one of the most outstanding men of his generation, a talented and clever young cultivator who harnessed martial arts, knowledge, and spirituality into powerful abilities. But when the horrors of war led him to seek a new power through demonic cultivation, the world's respect for his skills turned to fear, and his eventual death was celebrated throughout the land.

Years later, he awakens in the body of an aggrieved young man who sacrifices his soul so that Wei Wuxian can exact revenge on his behalf. Though granted a second life, Wei Wuxian is not free from his first, nor the mysteries that appear before him now. Yet this time, he'll face it all with the righteous and esteemed Lan Wangji at his side, another powerful cultivator whose unwavering dedication and shared memories of their past will help shine a light on the dark truths that surround them.

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Something to Fight For, Someone to Live For

Gods should never meddle in the affairs of mortals, but Xie Lian is not one to follow the rules when lives are at risk. He spits in the face of heaven and its laws and descends in a fury to save his country from drought and civil war. Yet this golden child gets a harsh dose of reality when he discovers just how little one individual—even a god—can do to save a crumbling nation. As the people reject and betray him, one young soldier stands by Xie Lian—a boy with a face wrapped in bandages and a fierce loyalty in his heart. In this chaotic past, can an unshakable bond grow from the ashes of unimaginable destruction?

RATED 17+

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